

JAMES WEINSTEIN: LET'S CRASH THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

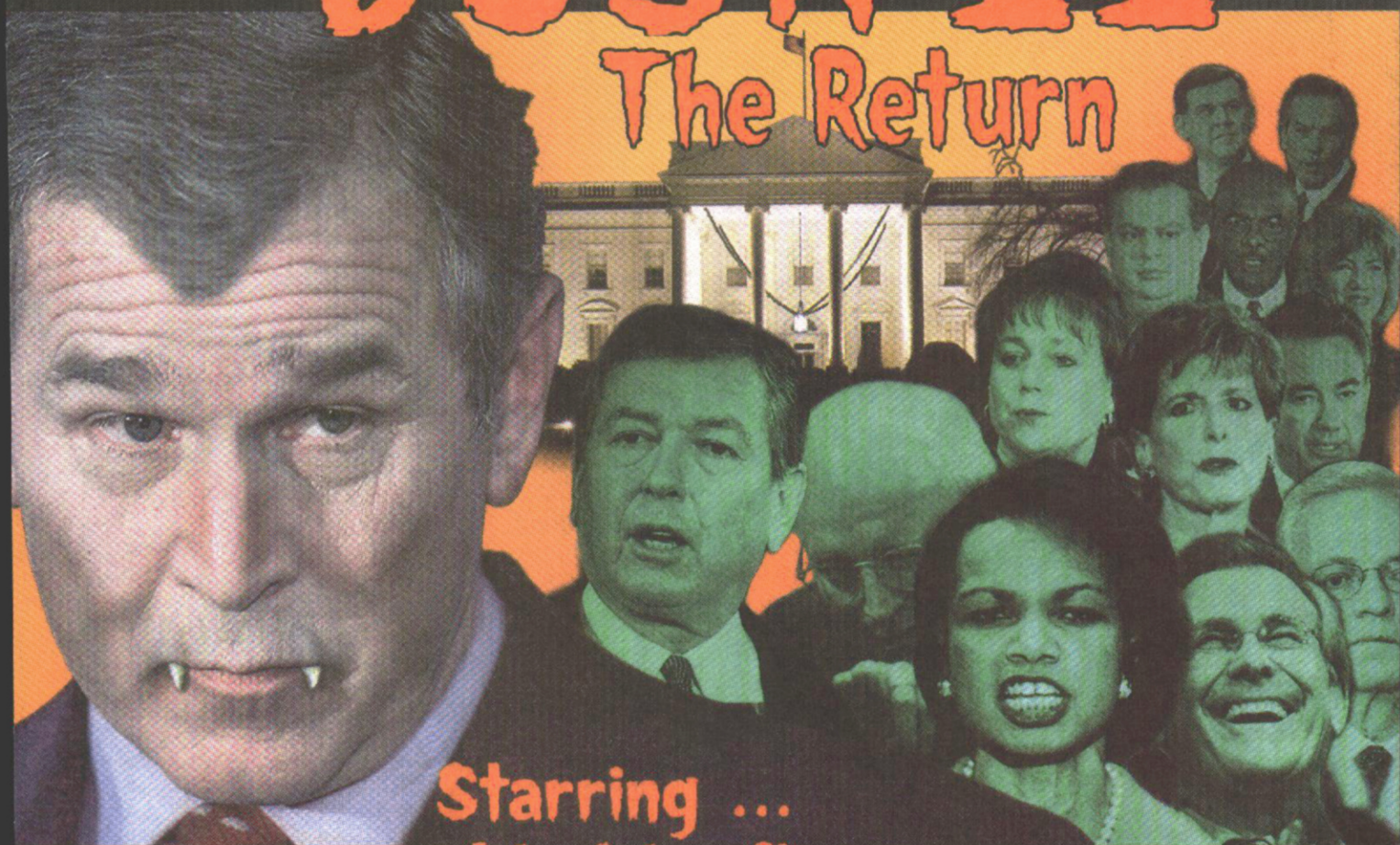
# In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

February 19, 2001

## BUSH II

### The Return



**Starring ...**

**John Ashcroft** as "The Crusader"

**Gale Norton** as "The Rebel"

**Donald Rumsfeld** as "The Rummy"

**Tommy Thompson** as "The Tinkerer"

**Spencer Abraham** as "The Oiler"

**Ann Veneman** as "The Pharmer"

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# In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

"... with liberty and justice for all"

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## Publisher's Notes

On the surface, Americans appear to be living in idyllic times: Our economy is robust, and the United States is the world's only superpower. Yet the growth of the economy has concentrated power in the hands of a few individuals and corporations (the top 1 percent now owns nearly half the wealth). Economic globalization has resulted in transnational organizations that operate above the law with unchecked power. Washington is awash with lobbyists representing the rich and powerful, while cynicism about the democratic process grows.

We are at a crossroads where we must decide between plutocracy—government controlled by the wealthy—and real democracy. To defend real democracy and act for the common good, we must begin to make systematic changes in our economic system.

The social justice movement has made progress on civil rights, but there has been little progress in the arena of economic justice. African-Americans and Latinos are still paid less than their white counterparts in a broad range of job categories. There has been slow progress in making the minimum wage a living wage. Yet the social safety net has frayed, disproportionately impacting single mothers and their children. When multinational corporations move jobs out of the United States to foreign plants, the workers most affected are those with fewer skills and those from low-income families.

While the impact of the growing chasm between the rich and the poor is well documented in these arenas, the impact on the environmental and peace movements is often more subtle.

The growing economic divide is illustrated within the environmental movement in the living conditions of the poor: Toxic dumps are found in their neighborhoods; they are more likely to live adjacent to plants dealing with hazardous substances; and their children disproportionately suffer from chronic health problems. Polluting corporations have lobbyists who represent their interests with government officials, but the poor lack this representation, thus they have a diminished ability to ensure clean air and water for their families.

Meanwhile, the United States now spends more on research and testing of nuclear weapons annually than it did on average during the Cold War—\$5 billion now versus \$3.7 billion then in constant dollars. These funds could be used to improve the living conditions of our society's working poor instead of financing nuclear weapons tests on the land of indigenous people, such as the Western Shoshone in Nevada.

Seeing this widening economic gap, it becomes apparent that powerful forces have arrayed in opposition to a morality of fairness. Some of this is attributable to the rich and powerful being unwilling to give up their privilege. But much is due to the "free market" mentality incorporated in transnational corporate capitalism that values profits over people. This mentality opposes efforts to raise wages and expand the social safety net, for to do so is seen as a threat to corporate profits.

We need to attack the proposition that market values supplant human values. To get at this directly, we must go to the source—"corporation think," the free market mentality commonly advanced by the captains of industry and their publicists. It follows that, in addition to a belief in fundamental equality and an understanding that the widening gulf between the rich and poor threatens our social fabric, the third unifying principle of the left is opposition to corporate capitalism. Unfettered corporate capitalism threatens democracy. Corporate power must be checked.

**We need to expose the prevailing economic myths as hollow and intrinsically undemocratic.**

We need to expose the prevailing economic myths of the "self-regulating marketplace," "corporation as person" and the "level playing field" as hollow and undemocratic. We need to change the rules that govern our society so that they benefit all the people.

Thanks for all your feedback. I enjoy hearing from you at [bburnett@inthesetimes.com](mailto:bburnett@inthesetimes.com).

Bob Burnett

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February 19, 2001

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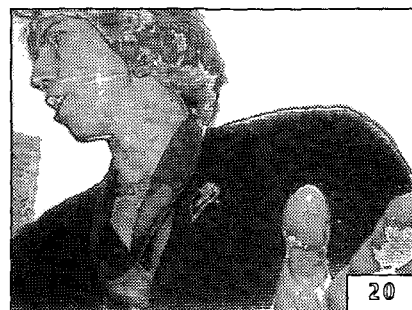
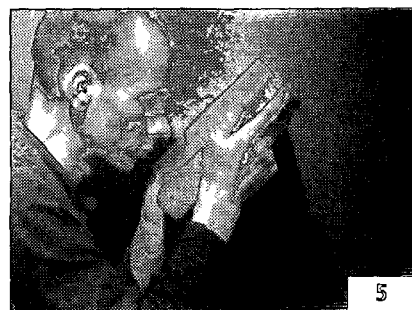
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Cover: Steve Anderson

## More Nader and Gore

The debate over how best to advance left electoral politics, and specifically the pros and cons of a third party versus working within the Democratic Party, is important. In 2000 the issue moved to the fore with the intense debate surrounding the Nader run for president on the Green ticket. This looks to be a central concern on the left for the foreseeable future. I thought *In These Times* did a credible job of presenting contrasting positions on these questions during the 2000 election cycle.

At the same time, I think the tone of editor Joel Bleifuss' and founding editor James Weinstein's contributions to the debate in your pages has been patronizing and insulting, and therefore counterproductive to the goal of fostering constructive dialogue. Bleifuss' latest polemic accuses unnamed Nader supporters of being politically puritanical zealots who "have trouble respecting differences of opinion" ("Letters," January 22). Whom, exactly, is Bleifuss referring to? Me? Barbara Ehrenreich? Cornel West? Michael Moore? Howard Zinn? Jim Hightower? Manning Marable? Patti Smith? Who are these imbeciles? If Bleifuss is going to engage in charges of this magnitude, at least he should be honest and brave enough to name names. And maybe, just maybe, give some evidence. If Bleifuss is unwilling to do that, he should keep the insults to himself. They serve no productive purpose.

Bleifuss does raise one important issue: He states the Jesse Jackson experience in 1988 showed that working within the Democratic primaries is a viable option for the left, clearly superior to the third-party route. (I think the implications are far more complex than he does, but that is exactly what should be debated.) Had Bleifuss focused on this issue, it would have been a genuine contribution to this very important debate, and it would have pointed us toward the future.

**Robert W. McChesney**  
Madison, Wisconsin

I commend the intelligence, foresight and courage of your recent editorials supporting Al Gore over Ralph Nader. Had Nader run as a Democrat, I would have wholeheartedly supported him. He would have been the best Democratic nominee in many years. However, running as a third-party candidate only worked to spoil the Democrats' chances of maintaining the presidency. I was sickened by the destructive rush to support Nader by so many. Thank you for maintaining a voice of sanity at *In These Times*.

**Richard Shore**  
Bronx, New York

Enough with the cannibalistic attacks on Joel Bleifuss' correct critique of Ralph Nader's candidacy. I would like to thank Bleifuss; he helped me cast my vote, a decision about which I feel stronger since reading the diatribes attacking his editorials.

I run a bimonthly magazine, *Residents' Journal*, which is written, produced and distributed entirely by residents of the Chicago Housing Authority: Cabrini-Green, Robert Taylor Homes and two dozen other public housing developments. The population of Chicago's public housing is mostly single mothers with young children and senior citizens. With an average income of just over \$9,000 per year, these overwhelmingly African-American residents live in 11 of the 15 poorest census tracts in the United States.

Chicago public housing residents have been victims of every wave of government social experimentation over the past 50 years. Democrats and Republicans, liberals, moderates and conservatives each experimented in turn on the residents, a practice reflected in the common name for the developments—"the projects."

Chicago Public Housing is where the rubber meets the road in terms of the failures of the two-party system. And yet, Ralph Nader was nowhere to be found in any development. He made no effort to contact residents, to visit the developments or otherwise to appear in any low-income community. Instead, he spent his time mugging for the cameras with movie stars and college students, two populations that presumably will be affected little by welfare reform, Social Security privatization and other tenets of New Democrats and social conservatives. When I brought this up with the residents, they smiled at me with the knowing look of those who have seen generations of idealistic white liberals come and go. "What do you expect?" they asked.

The Green Party and Ralph Nader should take Bleifuss' advice and become a caucus within the Democratic Party. Certainly, Greens should recognize the realities of American politics. But more importantly, Greens need to learn how to actually include those for whom they claim to be working in their leadership, policy-making and presentation. Flawed as they are, the Democrats nevertheless have been reaching out to and organizing low-income African-Americans for generations. The Greens should get off their high horses, take off their white gloves and learn from that history.

**Ethan Michaeli**  
Chicago

## Absolutism, Anyone?

Memo to Joel Bleifuss: Cut out the pop sociology. Bleifuss touts political compromise ("Letters," January 22), but he cannot coexist with leftists who abandon a party that abandoned them on basic economic policy, universal health care, workers' rights in an era of globalization, regulation of business and consumer welfare, military spending, capital punishment and the drug war. Absolutism, anyone?

Lesser-evildoers like Bleifuss refuse to address another matter—foreign policy. Gore and Lieberman boasted during the Democratic Convention, and repeated thereafter, that they "broke with" their own party to support the Gulf War. This New Democrat propensity to use military force was demonstrated eight years later by the attack on Yugoslavia, designed to reassert our "only superpower still standing status" and to marginalize the United Nations as an effective arbiter in international and regional conflicts. I doubt this bothers Bleifuss; he seems to coexist happily with Paul Hockenos.

Bleifuss may view the trade-off between some liberal domestic policies and death and devastation delivered abroad by U.S. bombs as "acceptable." I don't.

**Richard B. Du Boff**  
Haverford, Pennsylvania

**Editor's note:** Readers interested in the ongoing debate over *In These Times'* Balkan coverage and the reporting of Paul Hockenos may want to visit the following two pages on Z magazine's Web site: [www.zmag.org/hockenos.htm](http://www.zmag.org/hockenos.htm) and [www.zmag.org/openhermannitt.htm](http://www.zmag.org/openhermannitt.htm).

## Don't Steal This Movie

Robert Greenwald writes, "How dare Krassner reply to Stew Albert's letter by citing facts and making up quotes from me. There is no possible way I would say to him that I showed Anita Hoffman 'significant parts of the film ... in Toronto when she visited.' ... I never sent her 'sections for her pleasure.' ... I resent the distortion of the truth" ("Letters," January 8).

I was quoting accurately from an e-mail Greenwald obviously forgot he sent to me. Nor am I "sulking" because I wasn't mentioned in his film. Out of loyalty to Abbie Hoffman, I refused to cooperate with the making of *Steal This Movie* before there was even a script. My review didn't kill it at the box office. Word of mouth did.

**Paul Krassner**  
Desert Hot Springs, California



# Pentagon Syndrome

By Joel Bleifuss

Concerned about an apparent increase in illness and cancers among veterans of the war in Yugoslavia, U.S. allies are requesting a formal inquiry into so-called "Balkan Syndrome" and the safety of depleted uranium (DU) munitions. Britain and the United States oppose this move. But Sir Peter de la Billiere, the head of the British forces during the Gulf War, is calling for expanding the investigation into claims that DU could be a factor in Gulf War Syndrome.

During the Gulf War in 1991, allies fired more than 100,000 DU shells at Iraqi targets. During the conflict in Bosnia, the United States fired about 10,000 DU shells between 1994 and 1995. And most recently, in the war in Yugoslavia in 1999, U.S. jets fired 31,000 DU shells.

DU has several advantages. It is hard and heavy, and when deployed on the tips of missiles and bullets, it can easily pierce the heavy armor plating on tanks. Other types of shells work nearly as well, such as those made from tungsten alloys, but depleted uranium has one tremendous advantage over tungsten. It is provided to weapons manufacturers free of charge by the U.S. government, as an ingenious method of radioactive waste disposal.

Two types of DU exist. "Clean" DU is a by-product of the processing of uranium ore into uranium-235 (which is used in nuclear fuel and weapons). The other type is created at government facilities as a by-product of reprocessing spent nuclear fuel (done to to extract plutonium for nuclear warheads), and is known as "dirty" DU because it contains highly toxic plutonium and other radioactive materials. Until recently, it has always been assumed that DU armaments were made from clean DU.

Last November, U.N. researchers examined 11 sites in Kosovo hit by DU shells and found radioactive contamination at eight of them. Further, those tests uncovered evidence that at least some of the DU munitions in the U.S. arsenal used in Kosovo contained "dirty" DU. This raises the question: How much of its plutonium-processing

waste did the U.S. government supply to weapons manufacturers?

What's more, when DU (both clean and dirty) shells hit armored plates they vaporize in the intense heat, releasing a toxic dust of uranium oxide. That—along with the possibility that the shells are made from dirty DU—could help explain why about 300 of 5,000 Serbian refugees whose Sarajevo suburb was heavily bombed by NATO jets in 1995 have since died of cancer.

According to a 1998 report by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the inhalation of DU particles can lead to symptoms that include fatigue, shortness of breath, lymphatic problems, bronchial complaints, weight loss and an unsteady gait—symptoms that match those of sick veterans of the Gulf and Balkan wars. And a November 1999 guideline that NATO sent to its commanders warned, "Inhalation of insoluble depleted uranium dust particles has been associated with long-term health effects, including cancers and birth defects."

The official U.S. position is that DU is hazardous only in that it is a heavy metal. In a speech to the National Press Club, outgoing Secretary of Defense William Cohen explained, "Where it's unsafe, it's like leaded paint. Leaded paint does not pose a problem to you unless it starts to peel and then children or others ingest it." He acknowledges that the inhalation of uranium oxide dust created in the intense heat of a DU shell impact could pose a health risk, yet he pledged that the United States will "continue to use this depleted uranium."

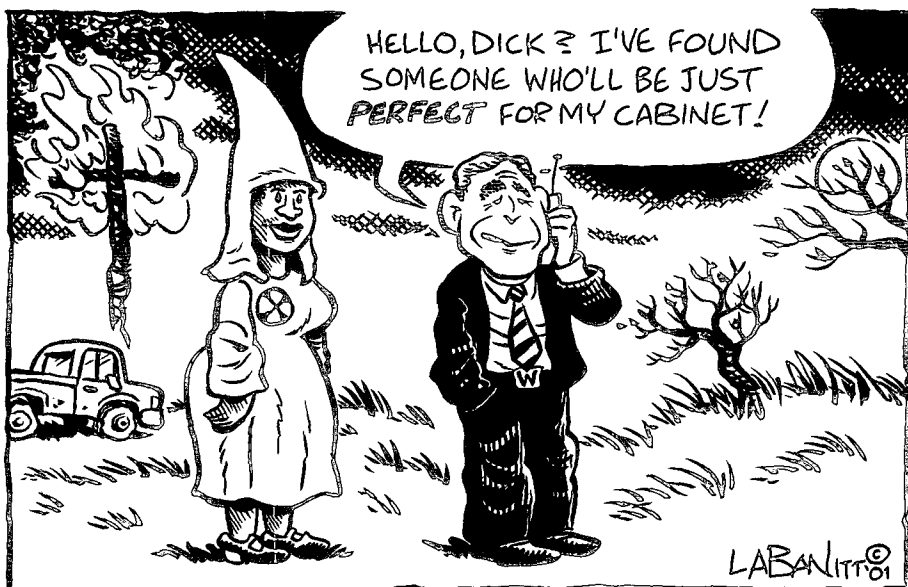
The Pentagon can be slow to change its mind. Veterans involved in the testing of atomic bombs and the citizens who lived downwind from those test sites fought for decades to make the govern-

**Depleted uranium is given to arms makers as an ingenious method of radioactive waste disposal.**

ment acknowledge that their chronic health problems were probably due to radiation exposure.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has called for a ban on shells made from DU. That would indeed be a sensible place to start. Next we might take up Yugoslavian President Vojislav Kostunica's suggestion: "We should be discussing the depleted conscience of those who used the notorious depleted uranium." ■

Terry LaBan



## Partners in Crime

Ehud Barak and Ariel Sharon may join forces, thwarting chances for Mideast peace

By Neve Gordon

JERUSALEM—The first Ehud Barak-Ariel Sharon alliance began in 1982. At the time, Barak was a young general in charge of strategic development; in this capacity he prepared a detailed proposal for the invasion of Lebanon. He handed the plan to Sharon, the defense minister, who launched the attack a few months later. The results were horrific. An estimated 20,000 Lebanese civilians died—including hundreds of Palestinians massacred in Sabra and Shatila; hundreds of thousands were wounded and displaced; Israel's death toll was more than 1,000.

Nineteen years later, it looks like the Barak-Sharon duo is preparing a comeback. Polls show Sharon heading for an easy victory in the February 6 elections with a 20 percent lead over Barak. Aware of the Knesset's problematic configuration, however, Sharon has declared his intention to create a national unity government in which Barak will be defense minister—a move that may serve to deflect an unfavorable international reaction to Sharon's government.

Whether the two candidates will actually join forces remains a matter of speculation. But the fact that they are the only contenders in the race is a sign of Israel's moral bankruptcy. Each already has proven his willingness to perpetrate horrendous crimes.

For those who have not followed Sharon's career it is important to note that his criminal record did not begin with the Lebanon fiasco, but can be traced back to 1953 when the military unit he commanded attacked El-Bureig refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. An estimated 50 refugees were killed in that operation.

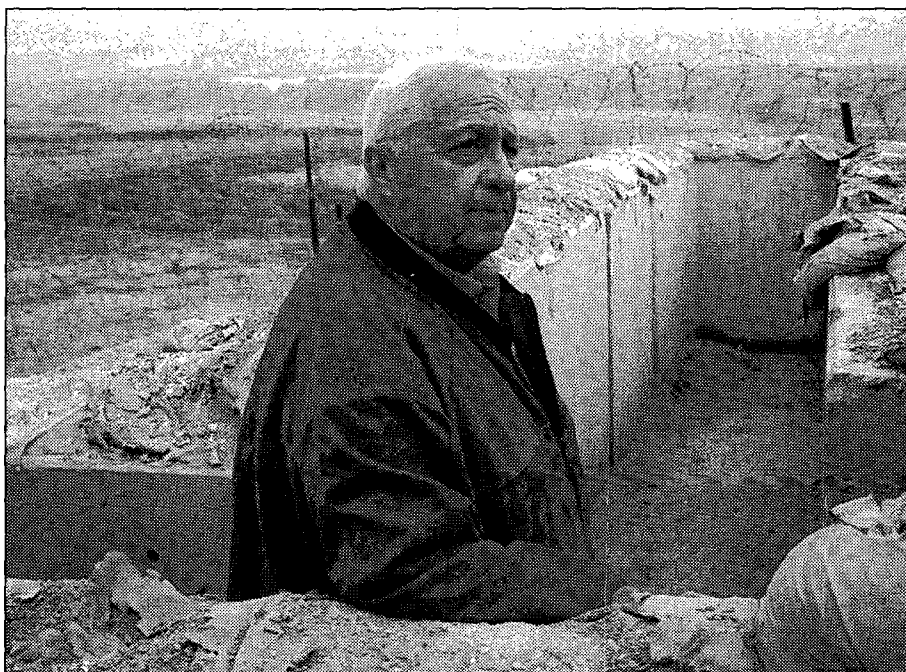
A few months later, the same unit carried out a massacre in the Jordanian village of Qibya. U.N. observers who arrived at the scene stated that the "bullet-riddled bodies near the door-

ways, and multiple bullet-hits on the doors of the demolished houses indicated that the inhabitants had been forced to remain inside until their homes were blown up over them." According to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's biography, "70 corpses were found in the rubble, including dozens of women and children."

As the military commander of Gaza during the '70s, Sharon introduced new methods of brutal repression. Unfortunately, neither these atrocities nor the Sabra and Shatila debacle put an end to his career, and today a war criminal is running for Israel's highest office.

they did under his right-wing predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu. When Rabin and Arafat signed the Oslo agreement in 1993, there were 110,000 Jewish settlers; this number has almost doubled. The construction of bypass roads also has dramatically increased. Given that the Oslo agreement is based on the principle of land for peace, the accelerated construction in the territories is a major obstacle.

The settlement build-up and the ongoing confiscation of land is the backdrop for the second Intifada. As *In These Times* went to press, 360 people had been killed in the occupied territo-



DAVID SILVERMAN/NEWSMAKERS

Ariel Sharon: war criminal and Israel's next prime minister?

While Barak's history is not as appalling, in the past few months he has gone a long way toward catching up. After defeating Netanyahu, he introduced two taboo issues into Israel's public discourse—Jerusalem's division and Palestinian refugees' "right of return." In this way, Barak actually contributed to the peace effort. Yet it is crucial to consider not only what Barak has said, but what he has done. As Edmund Burke once wrote, in politics conduct is the only language that rarely lies.

During Barak's short year-and-a-half tenure, Jewish settlers in the Palestinian territories have built as many houses as

ries since September 29, while more than 11,000 have been wounded. The Palestinians have buried 288 people (80 of whom were under the age of 17), and the Israelis 37; four foreign nationals were also killed. Barak has instructed commando units to carry out summary executions. The latest victim of this policy was Dr. Thabet Thabet, who was well known to Peace Now activists for organizing joint political activities as well as dialogue groups between Israelis and Palestinians. No one knows exactly why he was targeted.

As if the destruction of life were not enough, Barak also has attacked the Palestinians' livelihood. At the outset,



he ordered the military to implement a curfew on the residents of downtown Hebron. For almost four months, the houses of 37,000 Palestinians have been turned into prison cells so that a few hundred Jewish zealots can live out their fundamentalist aspirations. In other Palestinian cities and villages, hundreds of thousands of people are prevented from reaching their workplaces due to the hermetic military siege. The Gaza Strip has been divided into three sealed zones, and in some isolated villages unemployment rates have soared to 70 percent. Acres of orchards and fields have been destroyed, thousands of olive trees uprooted and hundreds of houses demolished. The grinding poverty is so severe that people are beginning to run out of food and medicine.

Barak strangles and dehumanizes the Palestinian people while continuously stating that he will do everything in his power to bring peace. Perhaps the most bizarre part of the upcoming elections is that both generals are running on the "peace" ticket. Nearly every slogan in Sharon's campaign includes the term; one cannot drive along Israel's highways without noticing billboards declaring "Sharon will lead Israel to peace." All this is reminiscent of Orwell's chilling political world where "Newspeak," the official language introduced by the government, facilitates the manipulation of the population.

Despite the well-oiled propaganda machine, many citizens have not been fooled. They recognize an impossible situation and consider the limited choice between two Napoleons as a dangerous restriction of the democratic process. According to current polls, unless a miracle occurs and Barak reaches a peace agreement, more than 20 percent of the electorate will either cast a blank ballot or not vote at all. This has created considerable pressure within the Labor Party, and rumors have it that Barak may quit the race, allowing Shimon Peres to take his place. Be that as it may, a tragedy is unfolding with no end in sight. Regardless of the election results, the near future will likely be bloody. ■

*Neve Gordon teaches in the department of politics and government at Ben-Gurion University, Israel.*

## A Decade Later, No Peace for Iraqis

Protests over the stringent U.N. sanctions on Iraq marked the 10th anniversary of the Gulf War on January 16. Demonstrators contended that the sanctions are responsible for the deaths of 5,700 Iraqi children each month because of a lack of food and clean water.

The Chicago-based group Voices in the Wilderness staged a protest outside the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York at noon that day. They held a brief prayer service before sharing a simple meal of lentils and rice, to represent the daily food ration allowed to Iraqis under the U.N. sanctions. Unpurified water from the East River was used to show poor quality of water available to Iraqis. Water purification systems left destroyed during the war are still in ruins because the sanctions prohibit the materials necessary to restore them. Afterward, when three dozen protesters blocked the doors to the U.S. Mission, police took 16 of them into custody.

The protest was part of a series of events planned by various religious and humanitarian groups, including an

airlift of food and school supplies to areas of Iraq affected by U.S. and British bombings. Leaders from 28 such groups flew to Baghdad, where they were joined by members of the Jordan Medical Association, to deliver the supplies.

In Baghdad, about 400 demonstrators organized by the Iraqi students' union marched through the capital on January 16, burning U.S. and British flags in protest of the air strikes. Just after midnight, coinciding with the time of the start of the war, an estimated 3,000 people staged another demonstration outside U.N. headquarters. One of the protesters was former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who called the ongoing sanctions "genocide."

The British government is looking into the use of sanctions against only a small group of goods, mainly weapons, instead of the "blanket ban" currently in use. According to the *Guardian*, in a switch in policy, they are also considering a proposition to the Bush administration to end the bombing of targets in southern Iraq. **Geeta Kharker**

## Mercy Rule

### Russia plans mass release of inmates from abusive prisons

By Fred Weir

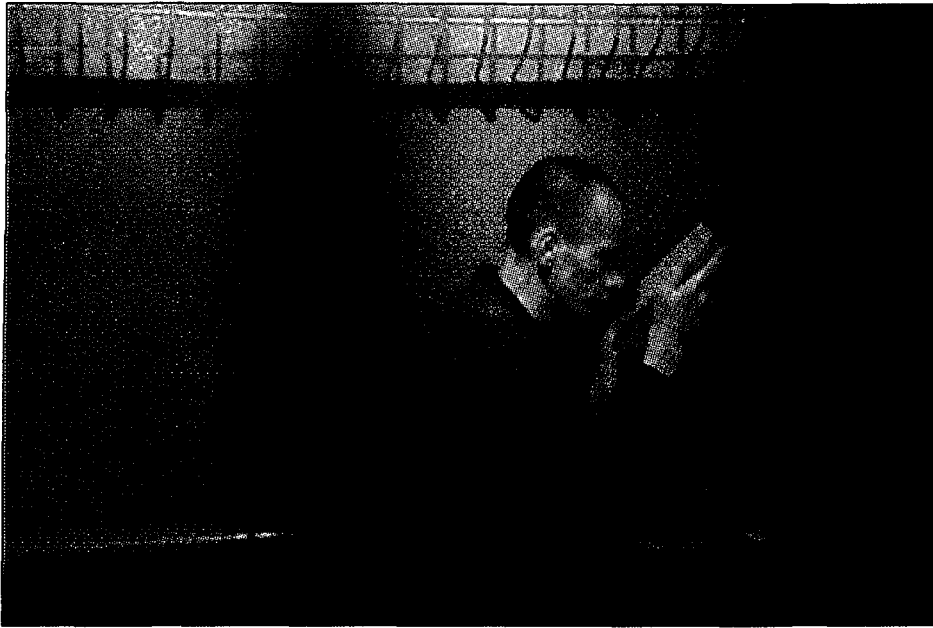
MOSCOW—Sweeping amendments to Russia's criminal code are about to trigger the biggest mass release of prisoners since the Stalin-era Gulag camps were emptied during the political thaw of the '50s. Experts worry that many of the estimated 350,000 convicts who will soon hit the streets of Russian cities may be homeless, alcoholic, drug-addicted or infected with AIDS or tuberculosis.

But even critics concede the new law, which parliament is expected to pass within months, signals the first-ever serious attempt to clean up Russia's overcrowded, noisome and brutality-plagued prisons, which presently hold more than a million inmates. The law's proposed limits on pretrial detention, reduced sentences for petty crimes and expansion of the probation system will make up to one-third of prisoners eligi-

ble for swift release. "It is only half a step forward, but it will partially relieve some of the ugliest problems," says Major General Sergei Vitsin, one of Russia's leading criminologists and an adviser to both the Kremlin and the Helsinki Group, a Russian human rights movement. "Our state is being pushed into this reform for urgent financial reasons, but the logic leads in a progressive direction."

More than 20 million Russians have passed through the prison system, one of the world's harshest, in the past three decades. Despite hopes for change over the decade since the Soviet Union collapsed, human rights experts say conditions in the far-flung network of jails, prison camps and detention centers remain squalid and desperate. "Nothing has changed," says Larissa Bogoraz, a former Soviet dissident who spent many years in the Gulag prison camp system and now works as a human rights consultant. "Anyone who enters our prisons can expect to have no rights, no hope, not a shred of mercy."

One-in-10 Russian prisoners is infected with tuberculosis, many with a drug-resistant strain of the disease



An inmate sits in the cell he shares with three other prisoners in Mordovia, Russia.

NIKOLAI MOSHKOV/TAR-TASS

The law also includes measures to make probation more accessible, to create a network of minimum-security prisons—which are much cheaper to maintain—for minor offenders, and to reduce restrictions on family visits, packages and other forms of outside aid for prisoners. Filimonov says the new rules will not apply to those convicted of serious crimes, such as murder, terrorism and treason. Critics argue that the proposals do not go far enough and that simply changing laws will bring few actual improvements. “There needs to be a radical decriminalization of whole swathes of our criminal code,” Vitsin says. “The police and the prison system are tied up with cases that shouldn’t concern them and huge numbers of citizens go to jail when they should simply pay fines or do community service.”

that is almost impossible to treat. Experts warn that AIDS is rife in the jail system, and is spreading due to the rapid growth of heroin addiction. It is hoped that the new law will dramatically ease the situation. In the short run, the expected prisoner exodus will reduce overcrowding and enable the state to improve nutrition, health care and living conditions for the remaining inmates.

But an amnesty of 120,000 convicts last year proved insufficient. “An amnesty is a one-time measure that lets off steam but does not address the underlying problems of our system,” says Oleg Filimonov, deputy chief of Russia’s department of corrections and the main author of the new law. “We need sustained reforms that will make our prisons more humane and fair, as well as more efficient.”

Russia’s pretrial detention centers currently house more than 300,000 suspects, who are often held for five years and longer while police investigate their offenses. These jails—known as SIZO’s—have been cited by human rights groups as places of routine brutality and neglect. “Police continued to torture detainees in order to secure confessions, using methods like beatings,

asphyxiation, electric shock and suspension by the arms or legs, as well as psychological intimidation,” notes Human Rights Watch in its latest report on Russia. SIZO inmates are often packed into cells with little more than sitting room, forced to sleep in shifts, given inadequate food and exercise, and almost no medical care.

The main impact of the new law will be to slash permitted pretrial detention to a maximum of one year, and to implement a bail system for those charged with minor crimes. “Many of these prisoners are not people who need to be kept isolated from society,” Filimonov says. “Our system is traditionally based on tough measures and no consideration for the accused. The definitions need to be changed.”

One startling indicator of the problem: Less than 1 percent of defendants before Russian courts are acquitted, compared to 15 to 20 percent in Western countries. “You are guilty even if proven innocent,” Bogoraz says. “That’s always been the rule.”

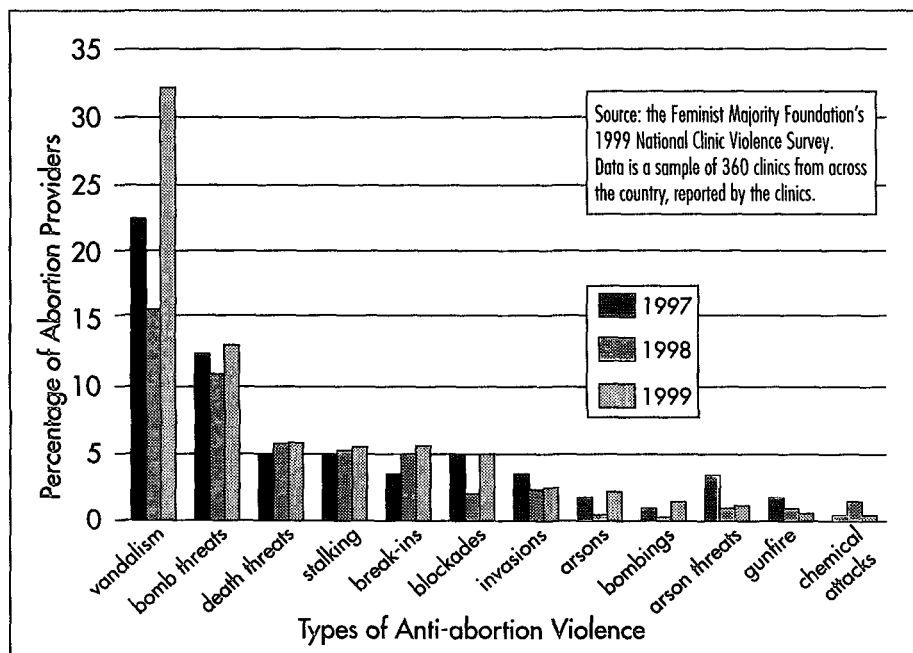
Offenses that would be considered misdemeanors in the United States, such as shoplifting, often entail sentences of several years of hard labor in a Russian prison camp. “Our system of justice is excessively punitive,” Vitsin says. “Taking a harsh and uncompromising stance against crime clearly has not worked. Our society is more criminalized than ever.”

The new law also makes no provisions for educating police, judges or prison



**Vive la Résistance!** Found in the Damen Avenue El station in Chicago, this poster was created for McDonald’s by Chicago-based advertising giant Leo Burnett. The campaign has blanketed the city’s transit system.





Percentage of abortion providers experiencing anti-abortion violence and harassment, 1997-1999.

STEVE ANDERSON/FEMINIST MAJORITY FOUNDATION

Source: the Feminist Majority Foundation's 1999 National Clinic Violence Survey. Data is a sample of 360 clinics from across the country, reported by the clinics.

(At press time, access to both Web sites varies from day to day.)

The nomination of former Missouri Sen. John Ashcroft for attorney general has delighted anti-abortion activists like Horsley. With Ashcroft at the helm, anti-abortion protesters would undoubtedly find more sympathy for their activities within the Justice Department.

The idea of a registry of RU-486 providers is not Horsley's. During the debate prior to the Food and Drug Administration's approval of RU-486, an official national registry was proposed but eventually thrown out after doctors and reproductive rights organizations protested. "We have a crisis of anti-abortion violence in this country," says Katherine Spillar, national coordinator of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF). "Who can guarantee that this registry wouldn't get into the wrong hands?"

In October, Rep. Tom Coburn (R-Oklahoma) introduced the RU-486 Patient Health and Safety Protection Act, which reintroduced the idea of a national registry and would severely limit those who could prescribe RU-486. Kate Michelman, president of the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL), characterized the legislation as impos-

ing restrictions that would "in effect negate the ability of doctors to prescribe this option for women."

Coburn quickly recognized that the registry was too controversial and dropped it from the final version of his bill, which eventually stalled in a House committee. However, he did suggest that such a registry should be left to the discretion of the Department of Health and Human

Services. Former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson, who also opposes abortion, will likely head HHS. (Coburn was recently defeated in his re-election bid, but his name has been floated by many on the right for the position of surgeon general.)

Horsley promises on his site that his registry will be a "database of those baby butchering 'doctors' and their closest blood cohorts in hopes that the American people will overcome the demonic forces presently enslaving this nation and will finally prosecute the purveyors of death listed herein."

Horsley also plans to add live Webcams located outside health care clinics to the site. He boasts that this project "will make things get very interesting very fast. People will locate themselves outside baby butcher businesses across the nation and film people coming and going. We want to catalog the people who go out to kill God's little babies."

There have been too many incidents of anti-choice violence not to take Horsley's threats seriously. According to FMF's National Clinic Access Project, one-in-five clinics experienced severe anti-abortion violence in 1999. These attacks included death threats, stalkings, bomb threats, bombings, arson, blockades, invasions and chemical attacks (see chart). At its core, Horsley's RU-486 registry is another open invitation to terrorism. ■

## Oklahoma Death Watch

On January 11, Oklahoma executed Wanda Jean Allen, its 33rd prisoner since 1976. Opponents of the death penalty and lawyers for Allen say mistakes occurred during her trial that cost her a proper defense. But Federal Judge Tim Leonard refused to grant her clemency and Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating rejected a last-minute appeal for a 30-day stay.

Allen was charged with the 1988 killing of her lover, Gloria Leathers. Allen's case was problematic from the beginning. She was assigned to Robert Carpenter, a lawyer who had never before tried a capital case and was paid only \$800 to defend her. The court denied Carpenter's request to be taken off the case before the trial started. In court, Carpenter failed to introduce as evidence an IQ test on

which Allen scored 69—borderline mental retardation.

Allen's supporters say she should have been granted clemency based on her mental impairment and insufficient defense, but the court rejected these requests. "She was seen as a throw-away," says Kevin Acers, a member of the Oklahoma Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. "So she got a throw-away defense."

Allen was the first black woman executed in the United States since 1954. At press time, Oklahoma was scheduled to execute eight more inmates by early February, including another mentally impaired inmate named Eddie Trice. "Taken as a whole," Acers says, "Oklahoma is a real showcase for the inequities in our justice system."

**Bob Bakhtiari**

# Overtime Out

## Nurses strike to end dangerously long shifts

By Jane Slaughter

FLINT, MICHIGAN—"After their 14th or 15th hour on the job, nurses are questioning their judgment," says Mary Robinson, a nurse for 30 years. Robinson is one of 600 nurses in Flint who've been on strike since November 8 against mandatory overtime. The strikers say that at McLaren Regional Medical Center, Flint's premier hospital, it's not unusual for management to schedule RNs for 16-hour days. Robinson, for example, works 3 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. in the recovery room but may have to stay another eight hours. "We can then be expected to be back the next day at 3 p.m.," she says.

At New York's Nyack Hospital, nurses walked the picket line for 151 days

last winter. RN Mary Louise Cahill says that when a nurse filed a grievance for being forced to work two shifts in a row, "they told her every time she came to work, she should be prepared to stay."

The Flint and Nyack strikes are part of a wave of resistance to the long hours that nurses say threaten patient well-being. About 16 percent of U.S. nurses belong to unions. "All the studies show that once you've gone through 10 hours, you've lost your edge," says Kay McVay, president of the 31,000-member California Nurses Association (CNA). "In this industry if you're tired and you make a mistake, it can mean a life."

In Massachusetts, the Board of Registration in Nursing has issued an advisory that refusal to work overtime will not be considered "patient abandonment"—a charge that can cost a nurse her license. This removes one threat from hospital managers' inventory of tactics for coercing nurses to work more.

The American Nurses Association (ANA) has issued a consumer alert

about hospitals' growing tendency to use mandatory overtime as a normal staffing mechanism. It's part of the "lean workplace" creed: Management tries to match staffing levels to a fluctuating patient census. Paying overtime is cheaper than hiring more staff because of the cost of benefits.

Suzanne Gordon, co-author of *From Silence to Voice: What Nurses Know and Must Communicate to the Public*, says that nurses are working harder every hour they're on the floor. Because insurance companies and HMOs have cut back on reimbursements, patient stays are shorter and patients' needs are more acute. With shorter stays, a unit may experience a 40 percent patient turnover in 24 hours—and the work is front-loaded for each stay. "It's not that management is saying to a nurse with four patients 'you have to work 12 hours,'" Gordon says. "It's a nurse with 14 patients."

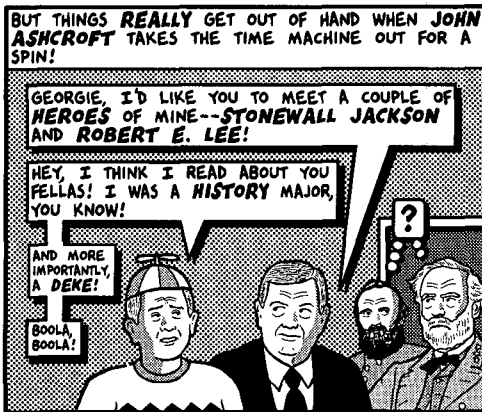
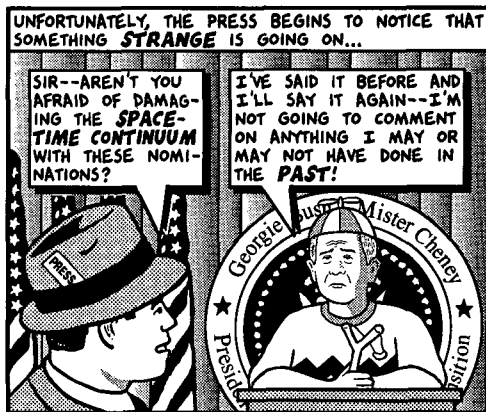
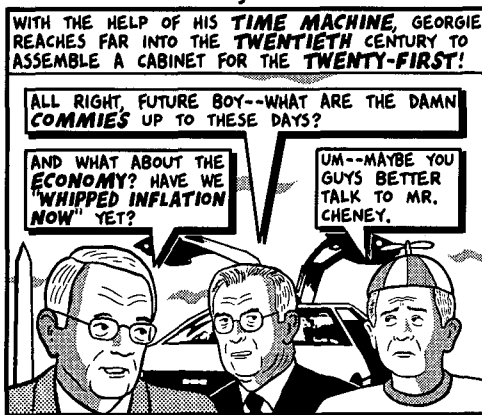
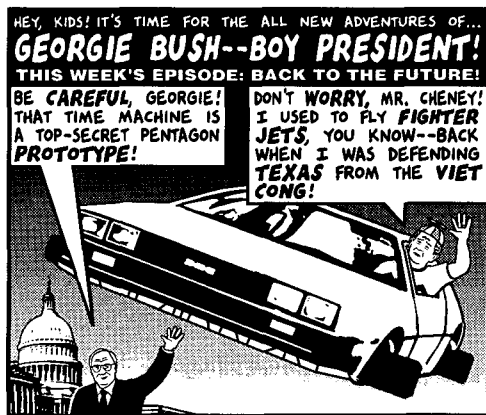
Even some hospital managers are admitting they have a problem. After Tenet Healthcare, the country's second-largest for-profit hospital corporation, lost a strike at a Worcester, Massachusetts, hospital last May, a company executive declared: "We are right at the beginning of a revolution in nursing. We believe nurses throughout the United States are willing to work long and hard to fight mandatory overtime."

At the Washington (D.C.) Hospital Center, a seven-week strike against overtime and other issues ended in victory last November after the local labor council's "street heat" network of ardent activists got involved. AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and other labor leaders were arrested for blocking the street in front of the hospital. Five nurses held a hunger strike—stationed on gurneys outside the hospital—that garnered daily media attention.

At Nyack, the nurses strike won the right to refuse overtime only four times per year. But they also won the right to set up a joint committee to

## THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



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establish lower nurse-patient ratios, taking into account how sick patients are and other factors. If those staffing levels are adhered to, overtime should not be necessary.

The Nyack nurses belong to the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA), which has called four strikes and weathered several near-strikes in the past three years. These, in turn, have made it easier for them to obtain staffing guidelines in other contract negotiations, says spokesman Mark Genovese.

At Buffalo, New York's Erie County Medical Center, for example, NYSNA nurses are celebrating an arbitrator's ruling that "schedules should not be posted that have obvious 'holes' in them" that create the need for overtime.

Other victories have been won without strikes. Joe Lindsay of the CNA tells the story of a unit at Summit Medical Center in Oakland: "On one night shift, all five nurses were ordered



Nurses and Autoworkers walk the picket line in Flint, Michigan.

to stay at 7 a.m., just as they were getting off work. All of them refused and were suspended on the spot. At 2 p.m., the hospital realized they had no one to staff that unit that night, so they called them and rescinded the suspensions. And that was the end of mandatory overtime."

Contracts the CNA has bargained since then have outlawed forced overtime except in government-declared emergencies.

On the picket lines in Flint, local labor groups have taken up the McLaren nurses' cause. On December 4, more than a thousand supporters rallied outside the hospital. Autoworkers' locals have taken up gate collections—one big GM local netted more than \$5,000—and raised "adopt-a-family" funds for Christmas.

As she prepared to ask her members to help the Flint nurses, Debra Rigiero, co-chairwoman of the bargaining unit in the Worcester strike, remembered the solid back-

ing her union received from the people of Worcester. "Community support just confirms that you're doing the right thing," she says. "Ask them to hold out as long as they can. Their patients need it." ■

For more information about the Flint strike, visit [www.afscme875.org](http://www.afscme875.org).

## Liberals for Sale?

At the Democratic National Convention last summer, Jesse Jackson brought down the house with another legendary spitfire speech. Although shunted off to "liberal night" along with, among others, NARAL's Kate Michelman and Sen. Ted Kennedy, Jackson stole the show. He proceeded to condemn the death penalty, wax prophetic about the Florida debacle—mentioning the too-close 1960 election when 112,000 votes propelled John F. Kennedy into office—and brought the crowd to its feet with his witty chant, "Stay out of the Bushes."

So why won't he—or his umbrella organization Rainbow/Push—be in Washington on January 20, shooing the Bushes off the Capitol steps and raining on Dubya's parade? Brewing sex scandal aside, why did Jackson—and for that matter, the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), the NAACP and the AFL-CIO—move their march to Tallahassee, far away from the second Republican Revolution? As *In*

*These Times* went to press, according to Rainbow/Push, NAACP President Kweisi Mfume, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and members of the CBC were scheduled to rally in the Florida capital in lieu of joining the inaugural protests in Washington.

An article by Peter Noel in the January 2 *Village Voice* ("Is Jesse for Sale?") sheds some light on the move south. Investigating why Jackson unexpectedly called Bush on December 14—an action many activists view as a white flag in the Florida battle—Noel writes: "Downcast Wall Street investors whose fears had been focused on a slowing economy demanded that Reverend Jesse Jackson curtail his blistering attacks on George W. Bush. These financiers arranged the controversial phone call that Jackson made to the 'president-elect' shortly after Al Gore conceded the race, key business figures told the *Voice*. Corporate moguls contribute heavily to Jackson's Wall

Street Project, an economic-development program intended to persuade New York's financial leaders to steer big-business bucks to minority communities and entrepreneurs."

Noel continues, "With Wall Street having factored in a Bush victory, sources in the financial community say, it was only a matter of time before major movers and shakers muzzled Jackson and other Gore loyalists crying thievery."

A financial insider told Noel: "These contributors told Reverend Jackson, 'You better hold this down because we won't back you anymore if you are adverse to the new administration in Washington.'"

Noel reports that the CBC was not told that Jackson planned to talk to Bush and many black activists were outraged.

With the absence of four of the most vital liberal groups from Washington on Inauguration Day, you might wonder: Who's not for sale?

**Kristin Kolb-Angelbeck**

# Pacifica's Christmas Coup

**M**ore than a thousand angry listeners of radio station WBAI-FM packed a New York City union hall in late December in a show of support for that station's longtime manager and two other veteran employees who were suddenly fired over Christmas weekend and locked out of their offices. The dismissals, which were ordered by the Pacifica Foundation, WBAI's Washington-based parent group, mark the latest in a series of crises that have rocked the tiny nonprofit network for two years.

Normally, radio listeners couldn't care less about who the manager of their favorite station is—forget about going out to a meeting on a frigid night to discuss the matter. But WBAI has always been a rare bird in the high-flying, fast-talking world of New York radio. For 40 years it has steadily remained the city's only leftist, radical, noncommercial station, occupying an increasingly valuable media platform right in the middle of the radio dial—at 99.5 FM.

No matter the issue, if you wanted to hear a dissident opinion that could be found nowhere in the mainstream media or on those right-wing radio talk shows, you could always turn to WBAI. If you wanted to know where the next big protest in the city was, what the big unreported international story was, or what the latest innovative musicians were up to, you had to tune in. The same usually held true for Pacifica's other four affiliates in Berkeley, Houston, Los Angeles and Washington. Because all of the stations depend on volunteers and listener donations for their survival, they have always had the most loyal and passionate followings of any in the radio world.

I should know. For nearly five years, I have worked as a part-time co-host on Pacifica's national morning news show, *Democracy Now!*, alongside the network's best-known journalist, Amy Goodman.

Even as the for-profit radio empires grew, as stations cut back on staffing and news programming became more tepid and homogenized, WBAI and the other Pacifica stations somehow managed to buck the trend, with reporting that forced

those in power to react. Sometimes the reports were strident in tone or insufficiently researched, but often they were far ahead of the commercial stations, and they always reflected the deep commitment of Pacifica reporters delivering important stories to the American public.



But now Pacifica, which has always prided itself on the democratic way it functions and how it involves community advisory boards in decision-making, has started to ape the authoritarianism of its capitalist counterparts. Nearly two years ago, a crisis erupted at the Berkeley station after the board dismissed a popular station manager. When staff members and the local community objected, scores were arrested for trespassing and the network locked out the staff and temporarily shut down the station.

That led to thousands of people surrounding the station in a string of protests, to lawsuits and to local politicians launching investigations of Pacifica's operation. While Pacifica's board eventually relented, reopened the station and brought back most of the employees, it did not change its manner of operation.

During that crisis, a memo surfaced from a Pacifica board member that mentioned the possible sale of the Berkeley station or WBAI—each could be worth as much as \$100 million on the open market—to raise funds for the cash-starved network. The board has since renounced that memo, but many critics still fear a possible sale, especially since some recent additions to the board since the Berkeley crisis are far more oriented toward the corporate media world than

the social activism roots of previous Pacifica board members.

Then came the firings at WBAI that many are calling the Christmas coup. Gone were station manager Valerie Van Isler; program director Bernard White, who has been with the station for more than 20 years; and Sharan Harper, a producer of White's popular "Wake Up Call" morning show.

In Van Isler's place, the board installed Utrice Leid, the host of another popular talk show. Leid's appointment has sharply divided the staff as well as the listeners, especially because she took over in the middle of the night, changed the locks in the station, banned several longtime producers from entering and brought in security guards.

"This is an internal matter," Leid told me in early January. "Some people have imperiled this station by their singular, rash, individual actions," she added, refusing at the same time to elaborate. In several on-air appearances since then, however, and in meetings with WBAI staff, Leid has suggested that White,

**An organization founded by pacifists is being turned into a network at war over democracy.**

Harper and others who were tossed from the station were being manipulated by Amy Goodman, and that Goodman has secretly orchestrated a public campaign against the Pacifica board and concocted a non-existent political schism merely to mask her own inability to accept supervision by anyone at Pacifica.

This attempt to turn a deep and long-simmering conflict—one that has spread throughout the network and involved thousands of people—into the personal machinations and fantasies of a lone individual would be laughable were the stakes not so serious.

Pacifica, an organization founded by pacifists, is being rapidly turned into a network at war over democracy. Only, as Berkeley showed, in this war it's the listeners and donors who will have the last word. ■

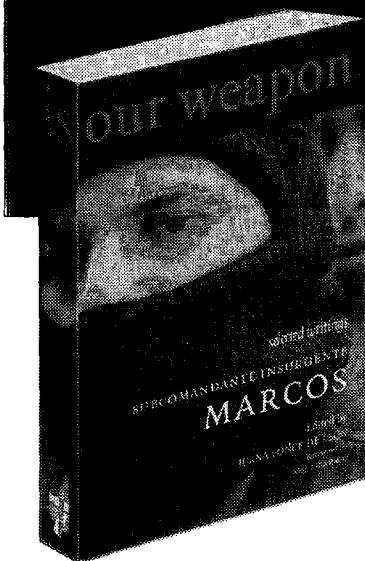


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Is this the democracy you wanted?"



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# Let's CRASH the PARTY (instead of throwing our own)

By James Weinstein

**J**ust about everyone agrees that there wasn't much to choose from in the recent presidential election. The dim bulb who spent more money than any candidate in history beat whom *Chicago Tribune* columnist Steve Chapman called the "most annoying person on the planet." But that doesn't mean nothing was at stake. A Republican in the White House, especially with a Republican Congress, is bad news for the well-being of the American people, as George W. Bush's cabinet appointments and announced priorities make clear. Fortunately, the amount of damage that this president can do is seriously compromised by his loss to Al Gore in the popular vote, the close division between the two parties in Congress, and the blatantly partisan 5-to-4 Supreme Court decision that ended the Florida recounts.

If the Democrats learn the right lessons from this election, they could win clear control of both the House and Senate in 2002. Doing so would greatly enhance the influence of the Progressive and Black caucuses in the House, the two most important left presences in mainstream politics. A Gore presidency without a Democratic House would not have done so. The left can play a key role in winning back Congress, but doing so will require two things: a profound rethinking of the fiasco brought about last November by Ralph Nader and his supporters, and some courage by Democrats who shared Nader's policy views but failed to push Gore to advocate more progressive policies.

**F**irst, let's look at Nader's aborted effort to influence the national policy debate: To begin with, despite his obviously decisive 100,000 votes in Florida, Nader didn't throw the election to Bush. He did attack Gore more consistently and more vituperatively than he did Bush; and he kept repeating that only Gore could defeat Gore. This was certainly true, but Nader betrayed a little too much glee at the prospect.

Nader's campaign did increase popular interest in the presidential contest. As the only candidate who talked meaningfully about many of the issues that the Democrats' social base—labor and ethnic minorities—cares about, he energized many voters. His attacks on the Republican policies of the Democratic Leadership Council stirred hundreds of thousands of university students with a new spirit of reform and brought many new voters to the polls. And once these voters were paying attention, many of them saw what was at stake and switched to Gore. In states other than Florida—Oregon, Wisconsin and Michigan, for example—this may well have given Gore his margin of victory.

Nader's effect on the left, however, is another story. Instead of building a constituency for his ideas, as he claimed to be doing, Nader divided an already existing one and did a terrible disservice to progressives. Clearly, the constituency for Nader's ideas is much greater than his following. For every person who cast a vote for Nader, there were at least 10 who shared his views on many issues but voted Democratic. By dividing these progressives, Nader also diminished the left's influence in mainstream politics. He claimed that he was running to build a major movement

**Despite the appeal of providing  
us with a home of our own, third  
parties are not only a waste of time,  
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for perpetual marginality.**

in the electoral arena. Instead, the illusions he created by running on the line of a party cobbled together for the purpose of his transitory individualistic campaign succeeded only in leading his forces up a blind alley, where they may be lost for some time to come.

The lesser problem here is the Green Party itself. This is not really a national party. In one form or another and in one state or another, Green parties have been around for more than 30 years, but they have little to show for it. In that time they have developed no coherent worldview, nor have they enjoyed any consistent organizational or political growth. Most of the party's few electoral victories have been in local nonpartisan contests—where party labels don't appear on the ballot—in white, middle-class, countercultural communities, mostly in New Mexico or Northern California. Nader himself is not even a Green Party member. His relationship with the Greens simply has been as a user of their ballot status.

The more important issue, however, is the impact of episodic third-party efforts on the ability of the left to come in from the cold. Starkly put, third parties have been dead ends in the United States for almost a century. As I have argued before, despite the appeal of providing us with a political home of our own—and of making us feel righteous—third parties are not only a waste of time, effort and resources, but a formula for perpetual marginality.



There are two reasons for this. First, a left third party is doomed to divide progressive social forces into hostile camps. In fact, Nader's campaign has already done so. Many who fought with Nader on the frontlines for the environment, consumer rights and other liberal causes now say he betrayed them by not withdrawing from the presidential race in time to save Gore's candidacy. In an interview with The Associated Press, Rep. John Conyers (D-Michigan), a stalwart congressional progressive who worked for many years with Nader on labor and regulatory issues, asked, "Who's going to work with him now?"

Second, even if this does not happen, such campaigns would be counterproductive because our political system is structured in a way that guarantees their frustration and failure. The history of third parties bears this out. With the exception of the Republican Party and the old Socialist Party, no third party has run more than two consecutive presidential campaigns. And except for the Republicans and again the Socialists, second third-party campaigns invariably have been weaker than first campaigns.

The Republicans, of course, elected Abraham Lincoln and became the second major party on their second try. The Republicans succeeded because they came along at a time when the Whigs, one of the two major parties of its day, was fatally divided over the question of slavery's extension into the territories—an issue of vital national concern that split the nation in the 1850s. Only in such circumstances can a third party win national office.

The Socialists ran five campaigns between 1900 and 1920 and were an important voice in American life until their breakup three years after the Russian Revolution. The Socialists, however, survived in a very different and more complex set of circumstances than we have now. And even they, a party with a solid national organization, more than 300 newspapers and magazines—including one with 750,000 subscribers—more than a hundred state legislators and thousands of elected municipal officials, could elect only two members of Congress.

In the 20th century, a few prominent left-leaning politicians did run as third party candidates for president, but they did so as individuals and to make short-term points. Former President

Theodore Roosevelt ran as a Progressive in 1912 because President Taft had deviated from Roosevelt's path, but his party quickly dissolved after the election. Sen. Robert La Follette ran as a Progressive in 1924, but he had no intention of starting a third party. Indeed, he explicitly forbade his followers from running candidates for any other offices, and after the election he returned to the Republican Party. Similarly, former Vice

President Henry A. Wallace ran on a peace platform as a Progressive in 1948, but that campaign only facilitated the further isolation of the left. And finally, in 1980, environmentalist Barry Commoner led an attempt to start a Citizens Party. Ignored by the media and the public, his effort fizzled.



The politics that works: Chicago's Harold Washington.

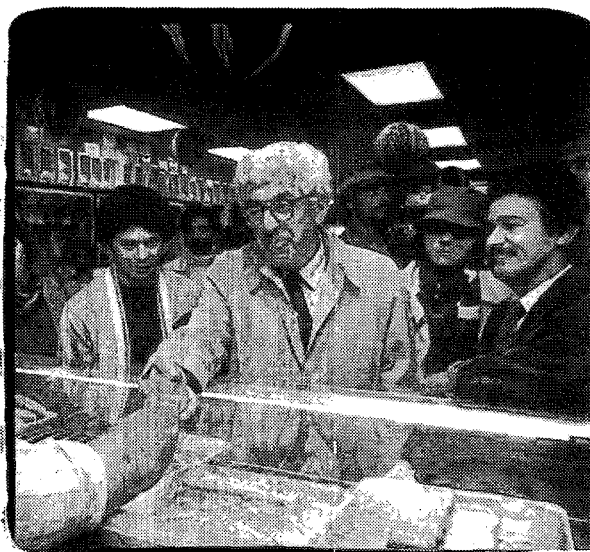
The structure of our political system is the main reason for the limitations of such efforts. In a parliamentary system where the members of parliament select the prime minister as head of government—especially in countries with proportional representation—electing minor party legislators makes sense.

Countries that have one or both of these systems frequently elect minor party members to parliament. And when they represent the balance of power between two major parties, they participate in ruling coalitions. The Greens have done this in Germany, as have the Communists in France. But in a system like ours, where the president is elected separately by nationwide votes and members of Congress are elected in single-member districts, only two parties can survive.

It is true that in the late 19th century, when Democratic and Republican party bosses simply locked out reformers, third parties were often the only path open to working people's reform movements. But when they had a measure of success, as the Populists did in the early 1890s, their demands were adopted by one of the major parties. Thus, in 1896, the Populists merged with the Democrats in support of William Jennings Bryan. But even this form of third party became unnecessary when progressive

reformers pushed through direct primary laws in the early 1900s.

Since then, our political parties have no longer been inaccessible to the public. In fact, as quasi-state institutions they are no longer political parties in the European parliamentary sense. The Republican and Democratic parties are legally regulated structures with fixed times and places where anyone can register. Open to all, they have no ideological requirements for



Barry Commoner's Citizens Party promptly disappeared.

membership. To become a Republican or Democrat, you just register as such. In fact, these are not really parties at all, but coalitions of more or less compatible social forces in which various groups contest for influence under a common banner. Of course, it is still difficult for any individual or group to succeed in this process without lots of money. But organized groups with clear programmatic ideas and a long-term commitment can become forces within either party.

The left seems unable to understand this, but the Christian right had no such trouble in the 1980s. A small minority, they entered the Republican Party as an organized force and backed compatible candidates, or ran their own, for local, state and national office. They knew what they wanted, organized to get it, and gained great influence during the Reagan and (papa) Bush years.

Something similar occurred on the left inside the Democratic Party in Chicago when Harold Washington was elected mayor. Washington, a lifelong Democrat, always talked about Chicago's two parties—but he didn't mean the Democrats and the Republicans. To him, it was his party versus little Richie Daley's. Unfortunately, his movement had barely begun to cohere when he died early in his second term.

Or consider Jesse Jackson: Acting largely as an individual, he ran twice in the Democratic presidential primaries. He participated in all the televised debates, consistently outshone his rivals and, in 1988, got 7 million votes. This success won him a prime-time speaking slot at that year's Democratic National Convention, where he made the meeting's most enthusiastically received speech. As a result, Jackson's ideas gained wide public exposure, and the African-American community greatly enhanced its national political visibility.

Like Nader, Jackson started at the top and was pretty much a one-man show. And like Nader, Jackson did not devote himself to building a movement after the election. Even so, Jackson, Washington and the Christian Coalition validate the principle of working within the existing institutional parameters of the American political system. These examples—rather than 11th-hour third-party campaigns that end up as moralistic exercises in futility—point the way to a strategy that might allow us to become a recognized force in the nation's political life.

Now that Gore lost, the usual vultures are already plucking at his carcass. Al From, president of the Democratic Leadership Council, has led the way in calling for Democrats to move even closer to the center. Instead of following Clinton's example of advocating smaller government, From claims, Gore made a fatal error by running a populist campaign. But From has it backward. Gore did best when posed as an advocate of working people—as he did at the Democratic Convention—and worst when he failed to follow through with anything of substance on major issues like campaign finance reform, universal health care, a higher minimum wage and government support of public education at all academic levels.

So how could the left could play a significant role in fighting for these and other causes within mainstream institutions?

First, the left needs to champion a set of principles that has all but disappeared from mainstream public life. Today, all but a tiny number of public figures, liberal as well as conservative, and

all commercial media share the implicit premise that the public good is best served by protecting and enhancing corporate profit. This deification of a mythical free market, even when unspoken, reigns supreme in policy-making circles and is rarely, if ever, challenged in the public arena. We must build a national movement that puts working people's needs first, explicitly as well as implicitly. Emphasis on particular issues may vary wide-

**Emphasis on particular issues  
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ly, but the positions we take should be based on the universal social principle of putting human need above corporate profitability. This principle should always be claimed as the distinguishing line between progressive and conservative policy.

Second, because it is based on universalizing principle, building such a movement requires a commitment to electoral activity year-in and year-out. Single-issue or interest movements—unions, environmentalists, civil rights, public health—can and do function effectively as lobbyists within the corporate ideological framework, but only rarely can such interest groups win and hold public office based on their particular issues or interests. But to learn how to unite people across lines of parochial interest, it is necessary to run for public office. That is the only way to bring and hold together a unified constituency committed to universal principles.

Third, success or the possibility of success in the near future is essential. That requires the careful selection of an arena appropriate to one's forces and goals. In national politics, it seems clear that the place to start is not the presidential level, but at the congressional district level. There are several reasons for this. Presidential politics is dormant for three out of every four years. Engaging in campaigns like Nader's entails a start-and-stop politics that leads only to wasted effort and disappointment. Both Commoner in 1980 and Nader last year insisted that they were starting long-term movements, but both efforts collapsed almost immediately after the election.

Part of the problem with this style of *politics interruptus* is that starting at the top requires a focus on a nationally recognized leader—someone like Jackson or Nader. In contrast, winning a congressional primary simply requires sustained organization, a clear program and a locally attractive candidate. In many cases a congressional primary is the real election, and winning one requires only half as many votes as the general election—because only 20 to 25 percent of the electorate bothers to vote in primaries. Thus a concentrated effort by a group of dedicated people working at the grassroots level—in the manner of the Christian Coalition—can win a major-party nomination for Congress relatively easily. Two or three such victories by a such a group within the Democratic Party would put us on the national political map and inspire others to follow suit.



**S**uch a progressive coalition could and should espouse many causes. Consider a few examples:

○ **Campaign finance reform:** True democracy requires equal access to the electoral process and to information about the principles and programs of the candidates running for office. Although the airwaves belong to the public, they are controlled by profit-making corporations and therefore only accessible to the wealthy. The idea that the American people own the airwaves and should control their use is easy to grasp. And the advantage to democracy of a system in which broadcasters were required, as a condition of their licenses, to provide free chunks of time to all qualified candidates is obvious. Providing substantial blocks of time would not only level the playing field of politics, but it would force candidates to explain themselves to the voters in some depth. Instead of using the 30-second sound bites that now dominate the airwaves and confuse potential voters, candidates would be able to have serious discussions. Such a reform would go a long way toward reducing the gap in political power between the wealthy and working people.

○ **Health care:** We should espouse the universal right to high quality health care through a system focused on patients' needs and doctors' decisions rather than insurance company profits. The least bureaucratic system that meets this requirement is the single-payer plan that now enjoys strong popular support in Canada. Under a single-payer system, the money would come from the federal government and be administered by the states, which would pay doctors on a case-by-case basis. Corporate middlemen would no longer have to approve treatment and the enormous waste involved in HMO and insurance company bureaucracies would be eliminated.

○ **Drugs:** The United States now has the highest per capita prison population in the world, and half of those in prison are there for drug-related crimes. This has taken a brutally heavy toll on African-American and Hispanic youth. Yet after decades of the war on drugs, drug use has not been reduced significantly. Several recent state referenda designed to loosen the laws against marijuana use indicate that the public is ready for a campaign to decriminalize drugs and to treat addiction as a medical problem.

○ **Education:** We should demand that all primary and secondary schools provide full programs of extracurricular activities, which have been shown to improve academic performance. Investment in education for this purpose would also require equal per capita funding, as well as more teachers and smaller class sizes. Such a program should also include equal access to colleges and universities. The way to end hostility over affirmative action is to guarantee access to all who want a higher education. That, too, will require increased federal funding for state college and university systems.

○ **The military:** The military budget should be cut to reflect the level needed to defend the nation against external threat, rather than the demands of military contractors and arms merchants and their servants

in Congress. Given the incredibly high level of corruption caused by lobbyists for the military-industrial complex, nationalization of the arms industry should also be considered. If the government removed the profit motive from arms manufacturing, the corruption of Congress by money from the armaments industry would also end and money for social programs would become available without incurring large deficits.

○ **Free trade:** Trade pacts should require both sides to guarantee workers rights and to protect the environment. Opposition to Clinton-style globalization has already created one of the major social movements of recent decades and is a key concern of environmentalists, labor and other key constituencies who put human need above the profit-driven priorities of international capital.

There are many other issues that could be added based on this universal principle of putting human needs above corporate profits. These include increased progressivity in the tax code, a substantial increase in the minimum wage, and strengthening the right to organize unions. But this is a start on what progressives might think about this year and prepare to campaign on next year.

We will need to flesh out these ideas and translate them into specific legislative proposals, but meanwhile we should be looking for six or seven House seats in swing districts or districts with a conservative Democrat who should be challenged in the primaries. Let's pick out some districts and find a local trade unionist, public health care leader, environmentalist or educator who has a following and take the plunge. If we do this, we might be well on the road to creating a meaningful left in our political culture. ☐

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# BUSH II: THE RETURN

The early reviews are in on the new George W. Bush administration. It has all the elements of the classic **HORROR** story: a predictable plot, familiar **VILLAINS** and an unshakable sense of déjà vu. On the following pages, we take a look at Bush's nominees and appointments, a diverse cast of characters in every way but **IDEOLOGY**. Left to their own devices, this collection of unrepentant cold warriors, anti-choice extremists, Wise-Use desperados and corporate shills (as well as a couple of reasonable old-fashioned conservatives) could make for a harrowing next **FOUR YEARS**.

Can the **FORCES OF GOOD** thwart this **EVIL PLAN**? Well, as the magazine went to press, thousands of townspeople were taking their torches to Washington to protest Dubya's inauguration, making one thing clear: **THERE WILL BE NO HONEYMOON!**

Craig Aaron

## THE RUMMY

By Jason Vest

**T**oward the end of his January 11 confirmation hearing, Donald Rumsfeld, George W. Bush's designated secretary of defense, fielded a pointed query from Sen. Robert Byrd. The West Virginia Democrat noted that Pentagon auditors had discovered that a whopping \$2.3 trillion in Defense Department financial transactions couldn't be accounted for in the past fiscal year. "My question to you, Mr. Secretary," Byrd intoned, "is what do you plan to do about this?"

"Decline the nomination," Rumsfeld deadpanned, defusing the tension by provoking a round of bipartisan laughter.

It's too bad he was joking. While John Ashcroft has become the *über*-conservative lightning rod of the Bush transition, Rumsfeld—who's just as frighteningly right-wing as the Missouri Pentecostal, though in more esoteric ways—has avoided almost any storminess entirely.

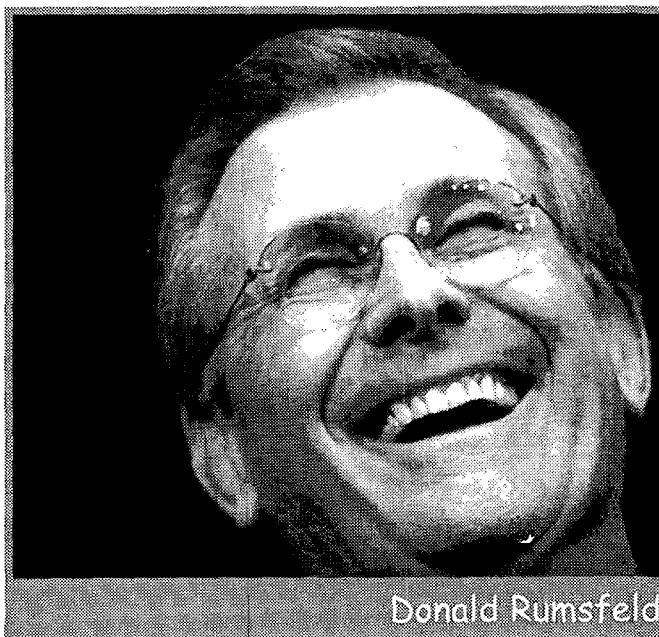
Long referred to as "Rummy" by friends and colleagues, the appellation is indeed an appropriate moniker for the 68-year-old Rumsfeld, who has been punch-drunk for the past 30 years on a heady brew that causes one to see military threats in wild, worst-case scenarios, thus necessitating—through shrewd private subversion and hardball public politicking—the promotion of an extremist agenda hostile to virtually any arms control agreement.

Regarding nuclear disarmament as something akin to particularly resilient undead bloodsucker, Rummy the Vampire Slayer's first confirmed kill came in 1975. Then in the midst of negotiating the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties (SALT II) with the Soviet Union, Henry Kissinger had planned to visit Moscow after completing an Asian swing in the hopes of wrapping up the negotiations. Between Hong Kong and Jakarta, Rumsfeld (then in his first incarnation as secretary of defense, under Gerald Ford) cabled Kissinger with piquant objections that forced him to reluctantly call off his trip. Then with Kissinger still in the field, right-wing establishment columnists Evans and Novak reported that a number of Ford advisers were "outraged" at Kissinger's "drafting top

secret proposals for major concessions to Moscow." The only hope to save the Republic from the betrayal of giving away the nuclear farm: Donald Rumsfeld, of course.

Though the sources for the Evans and Novak column were anonymous, those in the know had little trouble identifying them. A small coterie of conservative arms control opponents in the executive and legislative branches was becoming increasingly, if quietly, effective, and to them—Senate aide Richard Perle, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency deputy director John Lehman and Lt. Gen. Edward Rowny, among others—Rumsfeld was an ally, the antithesis of Kissinger, whose ideas of "détente" and "rapprochement" were not in line with their notion of "peace through strength."

Indeed, to this clique and their fellow travelers, no less an organization than the CIA was complicit in weakening



Donald Rumsfeld

KPT/CHUCK KENNEDY

America's defenses. According to them, agency analysts had been underestimating the strength of the Soviet nuclear arsenal for years, thus leading to dangerously low American defense expenditures. Many of Rumsfeld's protégés became the now infamous "Team B," the group of "outside experts" who not only wildly spun the CIA's existing data to reflect their own doom-



and-gloom views, but mounted an effective media campaign of leaking and spinning to create something approaching public hysteria. They effectively undermined the incoming Carter Administration's disarmament efforts and laid the foundation for the explosion of the defense budget in the Reagan years.

Though Rumsfeld entered the private sector after the Ford administration, virtually all of his protégés and comrades were elevated to positions of power under Reagan. From there, they defended programs Rumsfeld had pushed, like the MX missile and B-1 bomber. Though he did a brief turn as a special envoy to the Middle East in 1983-1984, the Rummy also played a quiet and influential role as adviser to Eugene Rostow, head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA). When Reagan fired Rostow in 1983, the president replaced him with another of Rumsfeld's protégés: Ken Adelman, whose sum total defense experience had been one year as Rumsfeld's special assistant at the Pentagon. Not surprisingly, Rumsfeld continued on as a member of ACDA's advisory board.

## THE PENTAGON ALL-STARS

**A**s George W. Bush moves into the White House this month, he would do well to heed the words of an outgoing president 40 years ago. "We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence ... by the military-industrial complex," Dwight Eisenhower said. "The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."

Eisenhower's words ring true today. In dollars adjusted for inflation, the United States is spending more on the military now than in 1961, when Ike gave his oft-quoted speech. This year's defense budget will top out at nearly \$300 billion. The United States spends 22 times the combined military budgets of its fiercest enemies—Libya, North Korea, Cuba, Iraq and Sudan. U.S. military spending, accounting for 80 percent of the world's, dwarfs that of rivals Russia and China and is more than all our allies combined.

In fact, Ike's words resonate a little more deeply now that Bush has assembled an all-star cast of Pentagon veterans for key advisory and leadership positions. With four-star general and two-war doctrine architect Colin Powell as secretary of state, National Missile Defense booster Donald Rumsfeld returning for a second term as secretary of defense, and former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney as vice president, Bush's advisers could form a de facto military-industrial complex over lunch.

While Bush mouths platitudes about "the modesty of true strength, the humility of real greatness," his choice of advisers reveals his firm commitment to U.S. military supremacy. And National Missile Defense, a major plank in Bush's platform, is immodestly expensive, unilateral and unworkable. The new president is calling for a "robust" shield to "protect all 50 states and our friends and allies and deployed forces overseas." This system—a triad of sea-, space- and ground-based interceptors—could cost upwards of \$240 billion.

A blue ribbon commission mandated to assess ballistic missile threats to the United States, chaired by Rumsfeld, gave conserva-

In the past decade, Rumsfeld's name usually has appeared on letters opposing various forms of arms control, including the chemical weapons ban. But it's only recently that Rumsfeld truly has reasserted himself as a patron saint of the Star Wars lobby. In 1996, Rumsfeld occupied a pivotal position as Bob Dole's defense adviser. Thus, according to Dole, America's "top defense priority" became National Missile Defense, a scaled-down version of the grand Strategic Defense Initiative of the Reagan days.

There was, however, a problem with Dole's assertion: Intelligence data and analysis didn't bear out the necessity of rapid NMD deployment. In 1995, the CIA reported that a nuclear missile threat from a new foreign power to the United States was at least 15 years off, and that the costly missile defense experiments were at best dubious. At this point another Rumsfeld acolyte, Frank Gaffney Jr. of the Center for Security Policy, mounted a campaign against the CIA's estimates and, with the aid of right-wing Republicans in Congress, successfully pushed for an alternative, outside assessment—in effect, another Team B.

tive Republicans powerful ammunition to push for NMD. But a closer look at the Rumsfeld report shows it to be a collection of speculative and paranoid assertions about North Korea's ability to hit the United States with a missile (for instance: they could strike the United States if China gave them a missile and the Aleutian Islands were the target). The Big Three weapons contractors—Lockheed Martin, Boeing and Raytheon—with large stakes in NMD are applauding Rumsfeld's appointment heartily, and laughing all the way to the bank.

On top of his commitment to deploy NMD, Bush has promised an increase in military spending of \$45 billion over the next decade, earmarking almost half for sophisticated new weapons technology. Unsatisfied generals, weapons manufactures and conservative hard-liners with close ties to Bush's defense triumvirate are already clamoring for more.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff were the first to call for more money for the armed services. Not coincidentally, the figures they used matched budget surplus projections, making their desperate descriptions of the "death spiral" of shifting resources from new weapon acquisition to maintenance of older ones, seem overwrought and hysterical.

Likewise, a recent Rand report, *Transition 2001 Update*, calls for, among other things, a 10 percent hike in defense spending mostly for new weapons research and development. The report is described as nonpartisan despite being chaired by Reagan Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci, a mentor to both Cheney and Powell.

Then there's the plan being pushed by the Center for Security Policy (of which Donald Rumsfeld is a trusted adviser), the National Security Industries Association and retired military big wigs. The so-called "four percent solution" is an ambitious proposal to increase military spending to 4 percent of GDP, just "one additional penny of the national economic dollar." But those pennies add up to more than a \$100 billion a year.

Bush, Cheney, Powell and Rumsfeld are listening closely to the proposals of familiar friends and former colleagues. As for Ike, the military-industrial complex and "the disastrous rise of misplaced power" he warned of remain more than clever historical curiosities.

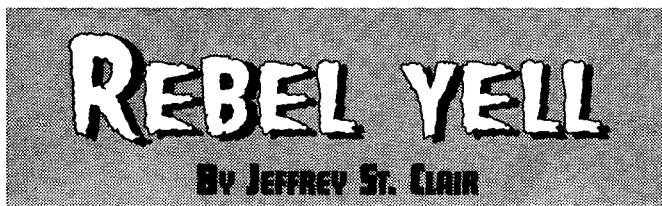
**FRANK BERRIGAN**

This time, however, the team—headed by ex-CIA Director Robert Gates—essentially concurred with the CIA. Once again, Gaffney called for another review. Thus the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States was formed, with Donald Rumsfeld as its chairman. Widely characterized as “bipartisan in its conclusions,” the final Rumsfeld Commission report declared that the CIA was wrong and the very real threat of ICBM attack from a “rogue state” was at most five years away. Such an event, Rumsfeld said, could occur with “little or no warning.”

Scores of experts since have taken issue with the report’s analysis, noting that key variables and scenarios were ignored or unexamined by the commission. While the report didn’t explicitly recommend the deployment of NMD, there was no doubt as to Rumsfeld’s desire to see the system—which Clinton had vetoed—put back into play, which is exactly what happened.

For NMD to become a reality, however, would require amending the landmark Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—something the Russians aren’t too keen on doing. No matter, Rumsfeld says. True to form, at his confirmation hearings, the Rummy dismissed the ABM treaty as “ancient history.”

Rumsfeld’s reappointment to the Pentagon also portends the probable return to power of Reagan-era defense bureaucrats. Dismissive of the idea of a world community and the evolving problems it faces, Rumsfeld and his ilk will likely try to recast the global power dynamic as the one they’re more familiar with: a world of nuclear superpower polarity, where the guy who controls the balance of terror with the biggest nuclear arsenal wins. ■



**J**ames Watt in drag. That’s how greens are referring to Gale Norton, George W. Bush’s pick to head up the Interior Department. She certainly has got the resumé to fit the bill: She was part of the original band of “Colorado crazies” who held the Interior Department hostage under Reagan.

One of Norton’s first jobs was at the Mountain States Legal Center, an anti-environmental think tank based in Denver and headed by the bumbling Watt. Founded in 1977, Mountain States was lavishly underwritten by mining and energy companies as well as Joseph Coors, that faithful patron of the far right. In return, Mountain States became a training ground for the Sagebrush Rebels of the ’70s and ’80s, spawning the likes of Anne Gorsuch (scandal-plagued head of the Environmental Protection Agency under Reagan) and her husband, the late Bob Burford (who handed out huge concessions to the ranching and mining lobby as head of the Bureau of Land Management). Then in the ’90s, Mountain States helped launch the more militant Wise-Use movement.

The Mountain States agenda is fairly straightforward: attack environmental laws, discredit green activists and promote privatization of public lands. Norton spent four years laboring at Mountain States, where she became known as a

fanatical advocate of property rights. Norton crafted baroque, and somewhat hare-brained, arguments that the Fifth Amendment requires the government to pay polluters and clear-cutters not to violate environmental laws.

Norton’s work in this far-fetched region of the law has borne fruit with a string of rulings in favor of developers from the fed-

**James Watt in drag.  
That’s how greens are  
referring to Gale Norton.**

eral bench, including a rare opinion written by Justice Clarence Thomas. Norton’s forays into property rights have also inspired counties throughout the West to pass so-called “custom and culture” laws, which turn the abuse of public lands into the equivalent of a property right. The result has been predictable: a decade of environmental hostage-taking, during which developers, timber companies and miners have threatened to destroy valuable wetlands or forests unless they are paid off.

Norton followed Watt to Reagan’s Interior Department, where she served as deputy solicitor. She remained there even after her mentor was booted back to Colorado in disgrace. In the solicitor’s office, Norton plotted to undo the Endangered Species Act, open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil companies, abet strip miners along the Rocky Mountain Front and eviscerate wetlands protection.

But Norton’s brand of libertarianism isn’t a two-way street. She regards subsidies to individuals—be they small farmers, poor mothers or grizzly bears—as immoral. Multibillion dollar handouts to timber companies, transnational gold mining conglomerates and utilities are, for Norton, just the price of playing politics.

As attorney general of Colorado, Norton could be found doing legal legwork for nearly every development scheme to hit the state. Most notably was the Amintas-La Plata project, one of the last of the big water grabs, a billion-dollar boondoggle that will destroy a river and sluice water to real estate tycoons outside Durango. She opposed any move by the feds to reserve water rights for wilderness areas or endangered fish. She was reluctant to press mining companies, which have fouled thousands of miles of Colorado streams with toxic runoff, to clean up their operations. And she trotted off to Congress to testify in favor of gutting the National Environmental Policy Act, the nation’s premier environmental law.

Like Attorney General-designate John Ashcroft before her, Norton also cherishes romantic notions about the Confederacy. In a 1996 speech, Norton compared her struggle to keep the EPA from enforcing tougher standards on hazardous waste and water quality in Colorado to that of the Confederacy during the Civil War. It’s worth quoting at length:

I recall, after I had just gone through this massive battle with the EPA on state sovereignty and states rights, visiting the East Coast. For the first time, I had the opportunity to wander through one of those Civil War graveyards. I remember seeing this column that was erected in one of those graveyards. It said in memory of all the Virginia soldiers who died in defense of the sovereignty of their state. It really took me aback. Sure, I had been filing



# THE CRUSADER

By Jason Vest

In 1992, I was covering the Republican National Convention in Houston when I found myself, along with a handful of other hacks, in a room where a few dozen self-described “evangelical conservatives” had gathered. As a colleague and I walked in, the meeting had already commenced, and a prayer circle was underway.

As is often the case in these settings, the exhortation to the Almighty wasn’t brief. I was slouching toward somnambulance as the appeal droned on and on when a verbal thunderclap jolted me back to reality: The leader of the homily prayed that “the people of America will see through the distortion of the printed page and that those in the media would join us to spread the truth of His word.”

I blinked in amazement; a glimpse toward my colleagues confirmed that I had not imagined it. “Who the hell is this guy?” I asked one.

“That’s John Ashcroft, the governor of Missouri,” someone replied.

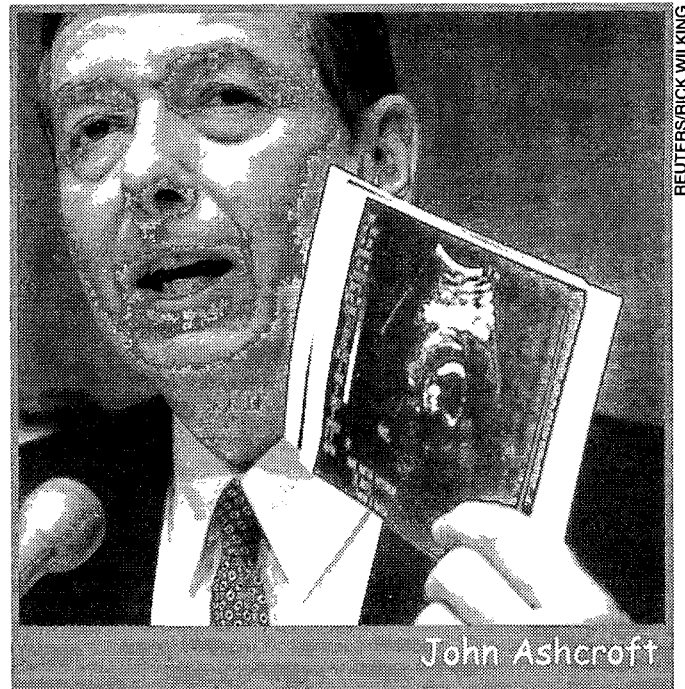
After the session broke up, I rushed for the governor and asked him if he was planning on making his prayer for the media a staple of his repertoire, as I was sure it would only endear him to the to the Fourth Estate as a sagacious politician worthy of respect and relevance. He shot me a look in response that I can only describe as un-Christian and skulked away.

After that experience, I was inclined to dismiss Ashcroft as a sort of droll walking malignancy, a comical melanoma on the already-diseased American body politic. But as I watched

For Ashcroft there is no distinction between serving the public and serving his particular Jehovah.

Ashcroft came to Washington and ascend courtesy of the fiscal aid of religious conservatives (as well as the liquor and tobacco lobbies) my amusement gave way to grave foreboding. With his every act, his every utterance, I found myself replaying that moment in Houston and shuddering. For Ashcroft, I now fully appreciate, there is no distinction between serving the public and serving his particular Jehovah. And that particular Jehovah seems to think that anyone else who disagrees with his apostle is in need of some sort of re-education.

It would be one thing if the ex-Senator (who I hope appreciates the irony of being defeated by one who died but lived on in the hearts of a majority of Missourians) was being dispatched to some minor department where he could



make only so much trouble. But when one considers the likelihood of journalists facing an Americanized version of the Official Secrets Act (approved by both houses of Congress, vetoed by Clinton, but expected to come up again), Ashcroft’s 1992 comments portend a particularly open interpretation that does not bode well for the free press clause of the First Amendment.

Indeed, despite his assertion that he will act as a “guardian of liberty and equal justice” in the service of the “rule of law,” which he defines as something that “knows no class, sees no color and bows to no creed,” his characterization of those judges who hold that a woman’s legal right to choose an abortion to be constitutional as “judicial despots” gives one pause.

And from his new perch, there’s no doubt he would throw the full weight of the Justice Department behind one of his more insidious assaults on the First Amendment, the “charitable choice” program he slipped into the draconian 1996 Welfare Reform Act. Referred to by the decidedly bland and nonpartisan *National Journal* as perhaps “the biggest blurring of the lines between church and state in many decades,” this little gem of a provision essentially gives federal money to any faith-based organization to provide whatever services it wants to the poor, addicted and afflicted, with a license to proselytize. Several legal challenges are underway, given the program’s blatant violation of the establishment clause, yet Ashcroft’s congressional allies have been trying to expand “charitable choice” from social services to faith-based education programs as well.

Conventional wisdom in Washington holds that Ashcroft is in for a bruising, if not bloody, set of confirmation hearings, but that he’ll emerge as attorney general in the end. If he does fail on the Hill, however, it’s entirely possible he’ll have another role in the Bush administration. If Bush decides to initiate a rapprochement with Iran—providing he can find it on the map—Ashcroft would be the perfect special envoy. Doubtless the mullahs would find Ashcroft’s brand of conservatism endearing. ■



# ASHCROFT'S ACID TEST

**B**y tapping John Ashcroft to be attorney general, George W. Bush set up a fierce confirmation battle in the Senate, now split 50-50. The showdown promises to test Bush's stomach for defending—and moderate Republicans' penchant for denying—the ugly underside of conservative ideology. It also poses important tests for several constituencies on the left—from African-Americans and gays to immigrants and unionists—still outraged by the electoral fiasco in Florida.

Early salvos against Ashcroft came from church-state watchdogs, who labeled him a foot soldier in Pat Robertson's culture war, and abortion rights groups, which decried his anti-choice extremism. In a lurid 1998 missive to the conservative magazine *Human Events*, the man who would be responsible for enforcing clinic-protection laws wrote: "If I had the opportunity to pass but a single law, I would fully recognize the constitutional right to life of every unborn child and ban every abortion except for those medically necessary to save the life of the mother."

Black leaders decried Ashcroft's work as Missouri attorney general to undercut school desegregation, his 1998 article in *Southern Partisan* magazine defending Confederate icons and his honorary degree from Bob Jones University. Particularly infuriating was Ashcroft's role in thwarting Missouri Supreme Court Justice Ronnie White's bid for a spot on the federal bench by mistakenly painting him as having "a tremendous bent toward criminals" and "a poor record

on the death penalty." White went down in a party-line vote, the first floor-vote defeat of a court nominee since Robert Bork and the first torpedoing of a district court hopeful in 40 years.

But the glaring problems in Ashcroft's approach to policy-making go far beyond race and abortion. On 20 key labor votes during the 106th Congress, Ashcroft voted against union wishes every time; he has a lifetime AFL-CIO rating of 2 percent. His record includes trying to undercut worker organizing by applying "intrusive, somewhat threatening" pressure to oversight boards, according to comments by former NLRB chair William B. Gould IV.

For gays, Ashcroft opposes workplace anti-bias protections, and he doggedly fought the nomination of James Hormel as ambassador to Luxembourg because of his sexual orientation. Hormel served as dean of the University of Chicago Law School, the very institution Ashcroft attended, but Ashcroft still questioned Hormel's credentials and tried to stop him from serving as an envoy, citing a "lifestyle" he found "offensive."

Ashcroft's nomination poses a challenge not just for progressives, but for the Log Cabin Republicans, who in peeling off 20 percent of the gay vote for Bush claim to have cast the election's deciding votes. The impending Senate vote looms as an early gauge of their sway on GOP centrists like Rhode Island freshman Lincoln Chafee, Vermont moderate James Jeffords, and Mainers Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins.

But above all, the nomination is a test for the senators themselves. Will the chamber's 13 women rise to the occasion? Can this 100-member deliberative body—once again, lacking a black or Latino face—conduct a hard-hitting discussion about race and fairness without getting lost in aimless detours? And will the GOP, which has used its majority status in the Senate to stymie Clinton's appointments at every step of the way for six years and through three elections, finally pay a political price for its massive resistance?

We'll see.

**Hans Johnson**

# CIAO, CHAVEZ HELLO, CHAO

**By David Moberg**

**L**abor unions had reason to celebrate when Linda Chavez, George W. Bush's first choice for labor secretary, withdrew from consideration. As a federal official, candidate, columnist and sharp-tongued heroine of the political right, she had been hostile to affirmative action and to a wide range of workers rights. But her downfall came not because of her views or union opposition to her nomination, but because she tried to conceal information from the Bush transition team about her payments to an illegal immigrant who was living and working in her house. As her replacement, Bush picked Elaine Chao, a candidate who has less of a record on issues related to the labor post and a career as a more diplomatic administrator than Chavez—but no apparent difference on major issues.

Bush's choice sent an unmistakable signal to trade unions that they will be in for a rough ride for the next four years. Republicans increasingly have focused on undermining the

political power of organized labor since unions have rejuvenated their political operations over the past five years, increasing the turnout and Democratic vote from union households. Dick Cheney said after the election that the administration would push for so-called "paycheck protection" legislation that would greatly disadvantage unions by requiring signed authorization in advance from each individual member for unions to spend dues money on political campaigns.

Chavez, who once was an aide to former American Federation of Teachers President Al Shanker, made a career attacking affirmative action and bilingual education, but she also opposed a higher minimum wage, mocked sexual harassment complaints, rejected family and medical leave and criticized doctors for forming unions. Her own record as a director of the federal Civil Rights Commission, which she nearly dismantled, and as a tough partisan attack-dog suggested that she would undermine the effectiveness of the Labor Department and turn it against organized labor. Chao shares Chavez's opposition to affirmative action, but her more business-like conservative style led the AFL-CIO to adopt an essentially neutral stance; the Communications Workers and Machinists unions endorsed her appointment.

Chao held a variety of positions under Reagan and in the first Bush administration, including chairwoman of the Federal Maritime Commission, deputy secretary of transportation and director of the Peace Corps, before becoming president of the United Way in 1992. The wife of Kentucky



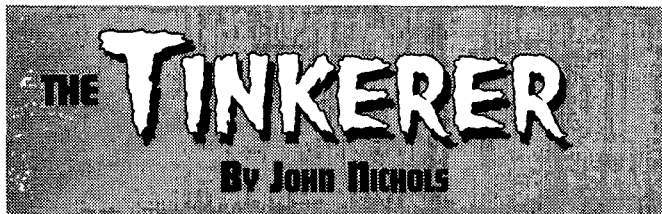


AP/STEPHEN JAFFE

Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell, a leading opponent of campaign finance reform, Chao has been a fellow at the conservative Heritage Institute since 1996.

Given the narrow Republican control of Congress, there are good reasons to expect Bush and Chao to promote an agenda that will give business owners more flexibility and less regulation. For example, Republicans have been trying to make it easier for businesses to classify workers as "independent contractors," to set up workplace "teams" that would effectively revive long-outlawed company-controlled unions, or to offer compensatory time off instead of paying premium rates for overtime work. Republicans also have tried to free businesses from direct Occupational Safety and Health Administration oversight, and may attempt to overturn the ergonomics standards for safe workplace design put in place late last year after 10 years of review and politically motivated delays.

One of the few things unions got out of the Clinton presidency was a reliable veto of most Republican anti-union initiatives. Now a Senate filibuster is the last line of defense. But by building on their mobilization of union members for political action, labor unions are also confident that they can win many of the fights ahead. With his appointments, Bush has made it clear that he intends to pick those fights. ■



**N**ame a social policy experiment from the past two decades—welfare reform, school vouchers, "reinventing government," corporate "self-regulation," abortion waiting periods, exponential expansion of the prison-industrial complex or the funneling of public dollars to HMOs—and you will find that Wisconsin Gov.

Tommy Thompson was the first into the laboratory.

Thompson is often referred to as a "reformer." But that gives him far too much credit. He makes change for the sake of change—turning theories concocted by right-wing think tanks into public policy with little real concern for the impact the changes may have on people for whom existing programs are an essential lifeline.

"The trouble with the national media coverage of Thompson is that, for the most part, reporters simply accept the claims that he has reformed all these programs and made them better," says Ed Garvey, a veteran labor lawyer who was Thompson's Democratic challenger in 1998. "When you look beyond the spin, you realize that his 'reforms' are more about grabbing headlines than improving lives."

It should come as no surprise then that George W. Bush—a president with little understanding of and even less sympathy for government programs—would tap Thompson to direct the more than 300 programs and 60,000 employees of the Department of Health and Human Services, through which more than \$400 billion in federal tax dollars flow annually.

Thompson is America's No. 1 public-policy tinkerer. A veteran of 35 years in elective office, the nation's longest-serving governor sees government in much the same way as a cut-rate mechanic does an old but serviceable automobile engine. To Thompson, the point of "reform" is not to provide

**To Thompson, the point of 'reform' is not to provide better services to citizens, but to see if the wheels of government will run with cheaper parts.**

better service to citizens; rather, it is to see if the wheels of government will run with cheaper parts—especially those "parts" recommended by the corporate bigs who pumped more than \$5.5 million into his last campaign alone. The problem is that the engine seldom works as well after Thompson gets done with it as it did before he got started.

The governor earned most of his national reputation as a pioneering welfare "reformer," implementing a sweeping "end-welfare-as-we-know-it" scheme that became something of a model for similar restructuring of aid programs across the country. The man who holds the copyright on the term "compassionate conservatism," Thompson sold his scheme as a move to break the shackles of government programs and free poor families to join the middle classes. Deep into the experiment, however, Wisconsin actually has a higher child-poverty rate than it did in 1979—13.5 percent in 1998, as compared with 8.7 percent two decades earlier.

If there is a second "reform" for which Thompson is credited, it is state support of the development of school vouchers, which direct public money to private educational institutions. Milwaukee's school-choice initiative is one of the oldest in the country, yet it continues to yield more contro-

versy than educational advancement for the low-income children it is supposed to aid. Indeed, according to a recent complaint filed with the state Department of Public Instruction by People for the American Way and the NAACP's Milwaukee chapter, more than one-third of the private schools using taxpayer money to enroll poor Milwaukee children were discriminating against prospective students by choosing some youngsters over others because of their religion, academic achievement or past schooling.

Most recently, Thompson has been in the forefront of efforts to funnel state money into HMOs as part of a plan to provide medical coverage for the uninsured. While the HMOs have been sucking up the taxpayer dollars, a funny thing has happened. Before Thompson's "reform" was launched, Wisconsin had the lowest percentage of uninsured citizens in the nation; now it has the 12th-lowest percentage.

"If he does for America what he's done to Wisconsin," Garvey warns, "God help us." ■

**John Nichols** is editorial page editor of *The Capital Times* in Madison, Wisconsin. He is the author, with Robert W. McChesney, of *It's the Media, Stupid!* (Seven Stories Press).



Dubya introduces Ann Veneman.

## THE PHARMER

By A.V. KREBS

**C**orporate agribusiness minions may well be heralding the appointment of Ann Veneman as George W. Bush's new secretary of agriculture, but the nation's family farmers should be at best wary of the choice.

Regarded as a protégé of Richard Lyng, who was agriculture secretary during President Reagan's second term, Veneman will oversee the department's 42 agencies, with a budget of more than \$100 billion and a work force of some 100,000 employees who run everything from soil conservation to animal health agencies, from rural economic development to federal food-stamp programs.

Veneman has considerable experience within the USDA bureaucracy. Beginning with the USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) in 1986, Veneman rose to deputy undersecretary for international affairs and commodity programs. She also was one of the early negotiators of NAFTA, and she served from 1991 to 1993 as the deputy undersecretary of the USDA, which at the time was the highest post at the department ever held by a woman.

But her appointment is also a political reward for California's Central Valley, where Bush concentrated his California campaign and received much of his financial support. Veneman's parents were peach growers in Stanislaus County in the San Joaquin Valley south of Sacramento. Her father was a Republican state assemblyman and undersecretary of health, education and welfare in the Nixon administration.

In 1995, California Gov. Pete Wilson selected Veneman to head the state's Department of Food and Agriculture. Her tenure there offers a few clues for what to expect from Veneman as head

of the USDA. For instance, her agency fought hard to extend the use of the deadly chemical poison methyl bromide when the sunset clause under the Birth Defects Prevention Act required that its registration be canceled. Eventually, an extension was approved (with the support of key votes from Democrats who represent agricultural areas of the state).

Veneman is a strong proponent of "free trade," believing that the "trend toward globalization is unstoppable." Between her service with the FAS, during which time she helped negotiate the Uruguay Round talks for the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and her appointment in California, she worked for the influential lobbying and law firm of Patton, Boggs and Blow. Among her clients was Dole Foods Co., the world's largest producer of fruits and vegetables. She also served on the International Policy Council on Agriculture, Food and Trade with representatives from Cargill, Monsanto, Nestle, Kraft, Universal Leaf Tobacco Co., the American Farm Bureau Federation and Archer Daniels Midland.

Veneman also advocates high technology's role in farming, from e-commerce to genetic engineering. She served on the board of directors of Calgene, a Davis, California company, later acquired by Monsanto, which pioneered genetically altered tomatoes. As she told an agricultural biotechnology conference last year: "We simply will not be able to feed the world without biotechnology."

Veneman's positions are not yet known on such pressing issues as crop price-support payments, antitrust concerns, the environmental dangers surrounding factory farms, and the fate of the expiring and disastrous Freedom to Farm legislation. But her views on free trade and biotechnology, coupled with her clear pro-corporate bias, make Veneman an enigmatic, if not pernicious force, when it comes to the immediate future of family farm agriculture. ■

**A.V. Krebs** is editor and publisher of *The Agribusiness Examiner*, a weekly e-mail newsletter monitoring the activities of corporate agribusiness from a public interest perspective. He can be reached at [avkrebs@earthlink.net](mailto:avkrebs@earthlink.net).



# MINOR THREAT

By SALIM MUWAKKIL

**M**el Martinez gained his first national exposure when he personally accompanied Elián Gonzalez, the 6-year-old Cuban refugee and last year's cause célèbre, on a well-publicized trip to Walt Disney World. Martinez is chairman of Orange County, Florida, one of the nation's fastest-growing regions, and the first Cuban-American ever to be named to a cabinet post.

Martinez is slated to take over the Department of Housing and Urban Development, an agency with a \$30 billion budget and a critical shortage of low-income properties. Bush has said little about urban housing during the campaign, and the issue is not likely to loom high on the president's agenda.

Martinez has an inspiring personal history. His parents sent him to this country at age 15 as part of an airlift known as Operation Pedro Pan. Landing in 1962 at a Cuban refugee-processing center on Matacumbe Key, Martinez began his American life alone; he lived in a foster home in Orlando for four years before being joined by his family from Cuba. Working his way through college at Florida State, he eventually earned a law degree and became a personal-injury attorney.

In 1984 he was appointed chairman of the Orlando Housing Authority, an agency that served about 3,600 families in the small but rapidly growing central Florida city. He held that post for two years before moving on to be president of the Orlando Utilities Commission, chairman of the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority and chairman of Florida Gov. Jeb Bush's Growth Management Study Commission. He was elected chairman of Orange County in 1998, where he is the leader of 13 municipalities containing about 820,000 people.

His policies have drawn mixed reactions from his constituents. He has championed programs that push home

ownership for low-income families, declared a moratorium on new residential projects in already-crowded school districts, was an advocate of increased federal and state aid to mass transit, and dismissed a city official who refused to diversify his staff. But he has alienated some residents of Orange County with strong support for Governor Bush's "One Florida" plan, which urges the end of affirmative action, and his calls for mandatory drug testing for both private and public employees.

In his two-year tenure, he has established a fairly good relationship with the county's African-American citizens. "Most black people in central Florida seem to be pretty content with Martinez," says Lottie Collins, executive editor of the weekly *Orlando Times*, the largest black-owned publication in the area. "There was a little anger stirred up by the Elián controversy, but many African-Americans knew he was being pressured by his fellow Cuban exiles, so they gave him somewhat of a pass on that."

It's clear that Martinez's appointment was a payoff for the intense loyalty of Cuban-Americans to the Republican Party, and he is not expected to present any policy problems for his benefactors. Then again, Martinez is capable of confounding expectations. ■

# THE THROWBACK

By DEAN BAKER

**T**reasury Secretary-nominee Paul O'Neill can perhaps best be viewed as a throwback to the old-fashioned breed of "enlightened industrialists" who occupied the halls of power back in the '50s and '60s.

O'Neill was the CEO of aluminum giant Alcoa from 1987 to 1999. Prior to that he was a top executive at International Paper, after having served as deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Ford administration.

When O'Neill took over at Alcoa, he announced that workplace safety would be a top priority. According to the Steelworkers, this was more than just rhetoric. Alcoa's safety record improved significantly during his tenure, and is now the best in the aluminum industry. George Becker, the union's president, describes O'Neill as "a man you can trust and believe what he says."

O'Neill also has at least paid lip service to environmental concerns throughout his tenure at Alcoa. In the early '90s, he was on record as supporting an increase in gasoline taxes. Alcoa has taken real steps to reduce its emissions of pollutants, which O'Neill claims has saved the company money. In 1996, Alcoa received an award from the World Environment Center (WEC), a corporate-backed environmental group that also receives substantial government funding, as the world's most environmental company. (Alcoa also has given significant contributions to the WEC.)

However, there are real limits to O'Neill's environmentalism. In 1998, he gave an address to the Aluminum Association, in which he warned of the serious threat posed by global warming, comparing it to the Holocaust. But rather than endorsing the Kyoto agreement, he also called for more research to determine

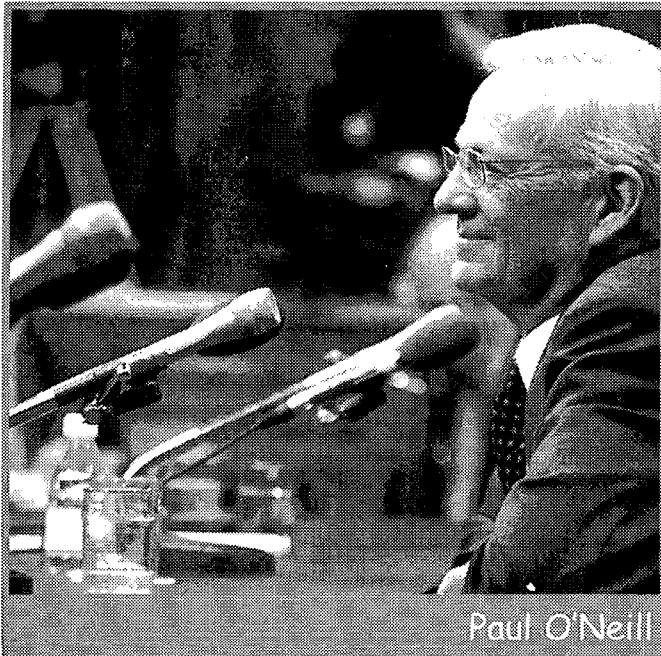


Mel Martinez

JEFF MITCHELL/FILE/REUTERS

the extent of the problem. (The aluminum industry, as a huge consumer of energy, is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions.) And according to the Environmental Defense Fund, some Alcoa plants rank among the worst in the country in several categories. In addition, Alcoa has been at the forefront of efforts to recycle industrial waste as fertilizer, a plan that raises serious concerns about food safety.

One affiliation that may best characterize O'Neill's political leanings is his membership in the American Assembly, an organization started by Dwight Eisenhower, prior to his presidency, "to illuminate issues of public policy." It was intended to bring together leaders from various parts of society to



NEWSMAKERS/MARK WILSON

think about the major problems facing the nation. A recent report from the group on the problems of inner cities included recommendations for expanding the earned income tax credit and increased government support for childcare.

It is worth noting that O'Neill's experience as the CEO of a major industrial corporation will bring a different perspective to Treasury. Recent occupants of this position have been more strongly associated with finance than industry. As a result, O'Neill may have somewhat more regard for the concerns of domestic manufacturing than his predecessors. Also, in a time when many people in business and politics have come to view the labor movement as a historical relic, it will be a change to have a secretary who has developed a constructive working relationship with a major union. (Though there have been complaints raised about working conditions at Alcoa's plants in Mexico.)

O'Neill may also be somewhat less committed to international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, which the Clinton team viewed as central to their agenda. In recent months he has been critical of the Federal Reserve Board, warning that its interest-rate hikes could choke off growth. While he is friends with Alan Greenspan, O'Neill may be more willing to publicly criticize his actions than the Clinton Administration has been. That would be a welcome change. ■

## TAX MURDERER

By DEAN BAKER

**L**awrence Lindsey, who has been named as President Bush's top economic adviser, is a supply-sider that progressives can live with. While he is an ardent believer in the power of markets and proponent of tax cuts, he also is willing to criticize the establishment and take the concerns of the poor seriously.

Lindsey joined the Reagan Administration in 1981 after studying economics at Harvard. He went back there to teach in 1984, before becoming a top adviser to the first Bush administration in 1989. In 1991, he was appointed as a governor of the Federal Reserve Board, where he served until 1997. In that capacity, he was consistently the most expansionary member of the board, regularly arguing that the economy could grow faster, and the unemployment rate could fall lower, than Alan Greenspan and other members of the board thought possible. Since leaving the Fed, he has worked as a consultant and maintained an affiliation with the American Enterprise Institute, a right-wing think tank.

Lindsey was the governor responsible for enforcement of the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA). This act is supposed to ensure that banks make loans into the communities where they draw deposits, limiting the outflow of capital from depressed areas. Enforcement of the CRA has always been minimal, but Lindsey was willing to listen to the community groups who were organizing around this issue, even if he didn't go very far in following their recommendations. Since many Republicans (and some Democrats) would like to see the CRA scrapped altogether, Lindsey's attitude is certainly a positive sign.

Lindsey's approach to the international economy may provide some grounds for optimism as well. Lindsey has been critical of the IMF-Treasury-Department-engineered bailouts in Mexico, East Asia and elsewhere. In particular, he was harshly critical of the Clinton administration's effort to crush a Japanese plan to set up an East Asian bailout fund to deal with the crisis in the region in 1997. He clearly does not feel the need to control the financial world from Washington. It is likely that he will try to implement some of the recommendations of the Meltzer Commission, which called for a scaling back of the power of the IMF and World Bank.

Domestically, it is clear that Lindsey will stand solidly behind Bush's tax cut proposal. But there may be more here than meets the eye. He has already begun selling the tax cut as a counter-cyclical demand-side policy that is needed to counteract an economic downturn. While the phased-in elimination of the inheritance tax will not stimulate the economy anytime soon (a key part of the Bush plan) a more progressive set of tax cuts would have this effect.

There is a compromise here in which there is an increase in the earned-income tax credit and a larger tax cut for moderate-income families, coupled with some tax break for the rich. This could provide an important stimulus to the



economy, and a boost to many families that need extra income, even if it does lower taxes on the rich.

Nor will Lindsey be shy about pressing the Fed to lower rates to stimulate the economy. This could be very important in the next few years, as there is likely to be some inflation resulting from the decline in the dollar, which the Fed will see as a reason to keep interest rates high. Lindsey was a critic of the Clinton-Greenspan high-dollar policy, and should feel little hesitation about its abandonment. He is likely to insist that Greenspan ignore the inflation that results from the dollar's inevitable decline, and instead concentrate on maintaining high levels of growth and employment. ■

## VOUCHING TIGER

By Hans Johnson

If the "president-select" were seeking an accomplice in his bid to transport the federal education agenda across mainstream lines, he found his man in Rodney Paige.

While Bush's designate to head the Department of Education is expected to sail through the Senate confirmation, the 67-year-old Houston superintendent and former football coach is under fire from gay activists for allowing

anti-gay harassment to go unchecked in the 200,000-pupil system whose board he sat on from 1989 to 1994, and which he has helmed for the past six years.

The Houston area has seen a spate of anti-gay hate crimes—including anti-gay murders, some of them involving local teens—stretching back to the late '80s. A 1997 report by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network flunked Houston schools on its handling of discrimination and harassment of gay kids. GLSEN also faults district leaders for failing to implement a 1999 report aimed at dispelling anti-gay prejudice in schools and issued by the very federal department Paige is slated to head. GLSEN is now leading a letter-writing campaign to Paige urging that he address the concerns of gay students and their parents when he becomes education secretary.

Paige's endorsement of school vouchers is also worrisome. At Senate hearings on January 10, Paige showed that he would keep step in a GOP retreat from support for public schools. Paige noted that he forgoes the term "vouchers" because of its icky ideological baggage, opting instead to promote "federal funds" for "nonpublic schools."

Sen. Edward Kennedy read between the lines and warned the nominee not to "abandon our schools." But even Vermont Republican James Jeffords, who in previous sessions has thwarted conservative bids to pass voucher schemes, joined a generally adoring chorus. Fellow senators, Jeffords said, would all "just run out and declare your victory right now," were it not that Paige still needed to pass an up-or-down confirmation vote. ■

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# The Generous Frontier

By Philip Connors

**W**illiam Kittredge grew up in the first half of the last century in the Warner Valley of southeastern Oregon, a place of great cultural isolation where, he writes, "The way in was the way out. Sagebrush

## The Nature of Generosity

By William Kittredge

Alfred A. Knopf

276 pages, \$25

deserts on the high and mostly waterless plateaus to the east were traced with wagon-track roads over rimrocks and salt-grass playas from spring to spring, water hole to water hole, but nobody ever headed in that direction with an idea of the future."

Kittredge's friend and longtime colleague in the creative writing department at the University of Montana, the poet Richard Hugo, once wrote in an essay: "Given our lean cultural holdings we grabbed at almost anything that offered escape or amusement." For Kittredge that meant books. He became a classic autodidact. Even when he was looking after his family's ranch in his twenties and thirties, he would wake each day at 4:30 a.m. and put in an hour with a book before heading out to breakfast with the men who worked for him.

It was a beautiful life for awhile, something near paradise. He lived in age-old intimacy with other creatures, watched the huge flocks of waterbirds wheeling overhead off the swamplands and helped sculpt the valley into a huge playground garden. But as the ranch's intricate irrigation system grew ever more complex, draining the swamps and flooding the fields, the waterbirds ceased to come. Kittredge and the men he worked with killed badgers with carrots dipped in strychnine; they poisoned coyotes, and the rodent population exploded. They sprayed 2-4-D Ethyl and Malathion and Parathion, and they shortened the lives of their fellow creatures and their own. Family rifts developed. Desperation supplanted caregiving. And, finally, half-crazy with confusion over how life in paradise

could go so wrong, Kittredge fled toward another dream of what he could be. "The point of things, I was beginning to sense, was cherishing, not owning," he wrote in the essay collection *Who Owns the West?*

In *Hole in the Sky*, a fine memoir written before the current fixation with the genre, he put it this way:

Over something like three decades, my family played out the entire melodrama of the nineteenth-century European novel. It was another real-life run of that masterplot which drives so many histories, domination of loved ones through a mixture of power and affection; it is the story of ruling-class decadence ... that we reenact over and over, our worst bad habit and our prime source of our sadness about our society. We want to own everything, and we demand love. We are like children; we are spoiled and throw tantrums. Our wreckage is everywhere.

Coming to terms with that wreckage, for Kittredge, is serious business. But he also has a knack for seeing to the heart of things with a wry sense of humor. "A Redneck pounding a hippie in a dark

**Kittredge has come to believe that storytelling is politics, insofar as stories help us name what we consider invaluable.**

barroom is embarrassing because we see the cowardice," he wrote in *Owning It All*. "What he wants to hit is a banker in broad daylight."

**I**n his books, Kittredge has fashioned a highly personal and sophisticated reckoning with the mythic story of the American West. Far from merely charting the damage, he seems intent on altering the very vocabulary of his culture. Certain words and phrases appear

repeatedly in his work: "complexity," "actual," "healing," "cherish," "taking care." His tale is a cautionary one; his project, in essence, is the naming of those things he has come, through hard-won experience, to value.

"We are what we can say or sing," he writes in *The Nature of Generosity*, his most ambitious book to date. Composed as a kind of montage, it moves across memories of his entire life, ruminations on his visits to Venice and Machu Picchu and the caves at Lascaux, and references to perhaps a hundred of the books he has read and been moved by. Part travelogue, part armchair philosophy, it's an exercise in what might be called anthropology of the self.

For instance, he quotes Simone Weil's "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force": "To define force—it is the X that turns anybody who is subject to it into a *thing*. The hero becomes a *thing* dragged behind a chariot in the dust." He then recalls reading *The Iliad* as a young man and tries to see his family's story through the dual prisms of Weil and Homer. "The pleasures of reshaping the world had led to betrayal and blood," he writes. "And families, hired hands, livestock, waterbirds in great flights on a summer morning—they also become *things* dragged in the dust behind the chariot of our ambition to own the world."

Through a sophisticated juxtaposition of scene and quotation, memory and dream, he advocates what he calls "extreme long-loop altruism," or "generosity toward strangers and ways of life we never expect to encounter as a method of preserving both biological and cultural multiplicity."

Kittredge elsewhere has said that for many years he had little use for politics. Even after escaping the ranch and beginning a new life as a writer and teacher, he understood storytelling as the main endeavor and politics as a dirty, far-off, unconnected business. But he has come to believe that storytelling is politics, insofar as stories help us name what we consider invaluable.

In *The Nature of Generosity*, he finds people spinning narratives of hopefulness, in ways both practical and philosophical. A neighbor in Missoula, Doug Bleeker, has transformed an



untillable former junkyard into an intricate garden by planting peppers, beans and tomatoes in upturned steel drums filled with soil. "Ripening cantaloupe were suspended high above the ground in old bras donated by women

and ecological crisis. Major food conglomerates now control almost every stage of the production process, from the patented (and genetically altered) seeds that grow crops to the finished product on the shelf. They've justified

places here where he slips into a preacher's robe are the least satisfying; he achieves his most powerful effects through juxtaposition, not polemic. There's a lovely scene in the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta in Venice, where he stands before several Byzantine mosaics of Christ and the apostles:

These stern images demanded that I inhabit emotions they didn't cause me to feel. Hard-edged and formal, they were news from a world that I had never inhabited, so they remained, for me, a set of vivid abstractions. Make of us, they said, what you can. But they were news from someone else's reconciliation with death, designed to honor a deity who seemed mostly oppressive and thus emotionally useless to me.

So most of my time was spent at the other end of the cathedral, studying a twelfth-century mosaic depicting the Last Judgment ... which brought me to emotions more useful than dread. Everything

depicted there descended through Eve's flowing golden hair, a cascade of significance reaching downward from Christ's crucifixion to human dead yielded up from the burying earth and the digestion of animals and sea creatures, the elect and the damned, their souls attended to and placed in balance. This, I felt, is how things actually are, interconnected by a fragile living tissue.

At heart, Kittredge is an optimist. He believes we have it in us to shape a future where munificence without coercion becomes our defining impulse. He made his escape from oppressive social structures. Why can't all of us? "Generosity is the endless project," he believes, and this lyrical work points the way. ■

Philip Connors is editor of the literary magazine *Croonenberghs' Fly*, whose first issue will be published this spring.



friends, and blossoming flowers, including seventy-five varieties of tulips, were interplanted with vegetables in abandoned urinals and bathtubs."

At the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, he listens to a theologian named John Cobb, who believes Europeans are entering a fourth societal revolution. First came Christianity, then nationalism, then a widespread belief in capitalism and economic growth as "a source of worldwide economic coherence." Now, Cobb says, we're entering a period where "earthism" will become the dominant ideology, one that puts each of us at the center of a project of caretaking for the planet and one another.

This will come none too soon. As Kittredge points out—to choose just one example of the forces arrayed against such a project—industrial agriculture is precipitating an economic

this in the name of efficiency, yet "the miseries of starving people around the world are to a great extent the result of inhumane choices within the market system, while agricultural corporations pretend this is the very tragedy they mean to prevent."

Here, for the first time, Kittredge writes very briefly about his other career, teaching. He says that, for one assignment, he asked his students to drive the commercial strip in Missoula, scrutinizing billboards and listening to commercial radio. "Their job was to count the number of times they thought they'd been lied to and tell me what it meant to them. Most hated the assignment, and I couldn't blame them. What comfort is found in the idea that we're incessantly tricked by powerful entities?"

This illustrates what Kittredge does best in his writing, too, forcing us to see the world through fresh eyes. But the

# Just the Facts, Please

By Steve Weinberg

**Editor's Note:** With this issue we are pleased to debut "Accuracy Watch," a new occasional feature in the culture pages, wherein investigative reporter Steve Weinberg scrutinizes the often hazy world of nonfiction publishing and its sometimes sketchy relationship with the facts. Readers are invited to send leads or complaints to [weinbergs@missouri.edu](mailto:weinbergs@missouri.edu).

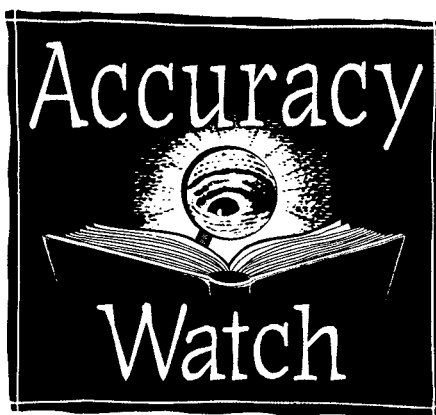
**B**ooks hold a special place in our culture. They represent expertise. They are the ultimate reference. When a student writes a term paper, she cites books without reservations. Professors do, too. Most authors take the books of previous authors as the truth. If it's between hard covers and controversial, it must have been fact-checked and lawyered, right?

But disputes over the accuracy of nonfiction books arise frequently. Each is interesting in its own way, and a few receive enough publicity that the general readership becomes aware. What lots of readers fail to grasp, though, is that the individual controversies are far more numerous than might be logically expected. The fact is, the facts in nonfiction books are frequently not factual. It is tempting to dismiss the situation as owing to human nature. After all, authors are fallible. A few mistakes in a 500-page work of nonfiction are to be expected, right?

Wrong. Authors, their editors and publishers should be working harder than most of them do to achieve accuracy. I say that as an author of nonfiction books for six publishers. During the two decades I've tracked the phenomenon, hundreds of books, written by talented (and sometimes not-so-talented) authors, published by usually responsible houses, have been criticized persuasively and publicly. That's good on one level: Debate is healthy for democracy. What's not so good is that many—probably most—readers have no idea any controversy exists. Authors frequently stonewall their critics. Publishers frequently do nothing to make corrections. When corrections do get made via new printings or paperback editions, the

original flawed versions continue to sell in stores, sit on home shelves, circulate from libraries, and be cited in research papers and in future books—thus perpetuating the reign of error.

**P**erhaps the biggest embarrassment in recent memory came from one of the majors, St. Martin's Press, which published J.H. Hatfield's exposé *Fortunate Son: George W. Bush and the Making of an American President*. Let's ignore that Hatfield forgot to tell his



readers about his criminal past. Let's focus instead on the text, in which Hatfield overreaches his evidence again and again. A mundane but telling example: Diane King is mentioned as an interview source in multiple chapters. Hatfield never says who King is, how she knows anything about Bush, or precisely what she divulged.

Well, it turns out King is the newsroom librarian for the daily paper in Midland, Texas. She says she photocopied articles from the newspaper for Hatfield—period. She never granted an interview, and had no detailed knowledge about Bush beyond what had appeared in the newspaper. Any experienced investigative reporter could have told the St. Martin's editors to jettison the manuscript. (After St. Martin's withdrew the book, a small, youthful publisher, Soft Skull Press, reissued it. There is no indication that Soft Skull did anything to seriously check the accuracy of the book it resurrected.)

Frequently, however, such embarrassments are produced by superb

journalists, as in John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: A Savannah Story*. It became one of the bestselling narrative nonfiction books of all time when published by Random House in 1994. Berendt has excellent research skills and is a fine stylist. But he chose to fictionalize scenes, and Random House published those scenes as fact. Sources made compelling claims of misrepresentation, too. Hatfield at least suffered disgrace, and inside St. Martin's there was a shake-up of sorts. Berendt and those involved at Random House managed to elude disgrace, sending a signal that accuracy is of little concern if the book earns enough money.

Sebastian Junger came close to emulating the best—and the worst—of Berendt with *A Perfect Storm*. Junger's 1998 bestseller contains an inexcusable number of factual errors as well as scenes whose verisimilitude have been questioned. To the credit of Junger and publisher W.W. Norton, the factual errors got corrected in later printings. But many books sell too sparsely to warrant a new printing. Needless to say, the errors live on in the early printings, despite Norton's efforts after the fact. (Disclosure: I am currently writing a book under contract to W.W. Norton.)

To name a few other prominent authors and publishers embroiled in controversies over accuracy: Gail Sheehy, *Hillary's Choice* (Random House); John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (Viking); Anthony Summers, *The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon* (Viking); Richard Ben Cramer, *Joe DiMaggio: The Hero's Life* (Simon & Schuster); Patrick Tierney, *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon* (W.W. Norton); and a bunch of Clinton scandal books. It's possible that those pointing out errors are themselves in error; in any case, I have been pleased to locate detailed responses from some of the authors accused of carelessness.

**W**hen two or more nonfiction books cover essentially the same subject matter—as with the Clinton scandal books—comparing them is usually alarming. I'll never forget the time I read two biographies of Panamanian dictator



Manuel Noriega. At least one of those authors had to be mistaken about Noriega's favorite liquor (Old Crow or Johnnie Walker Black Label), whether his father had acknowledged paternity, and about the credibility of an important source. Later, I reviewed four biographies of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover simultaneously. I should have known almost

**An author's omissions  
can be harder to  
determine than the  
actually published  
lies, and tend to be  
far more dishonest.**

everything knowable about Hoover's early life, FBI career, sexual orientation and what happened within the agency just after he died. Instead, I mostly felt confusion because the biographers disagreed about so much.

Autobiography/memoir is an entire genre that can make a crusader for accuracy cry, and not primarily because the tales told within that genre are often maudlin: As usual, some recent autobiographies have turned out to be false, as publishers over and over fail to question whether lives that sound too amazing to be truthful might be made up in whole or in part. One recent example: *Ten Thousand Sorrows* by Elizabeth Kim (Doubleday). The evidence appears strong that Kim, who says she was conceived shortly after the end of the Korean War by a Korean woman and an American soldier, falsified portions of her life. But unless readers of Kim's book happened to see The Associated Press story exposing the falsities, how will they learn that a hoax may have been perpetrated upon them?

One of the most disturbing autobiography episodes occurred in 1995. *Sleepers*, written by Lorenzo Carcaterra and published by Ballantine, became a bestseller, went into paperback and spawned a Hollywood movie. Such success occurred despite a widespread belief among reviewers that he invented crimes supposedly committed by himself and others. Why should authors who are guilty of falsification—or at least refuse

to reveal their documentation when challenged—be rewarded with paperback editions and movie deals?

Nothing surprises me any more when it comes to autobiographies and their first cousins, memoirs. As a biographer, I study autobiographies of my subjects, their friends and their enemies. Given enough time, I almost always find falsehoods. What is harder to find are the omissions. I wrote the only independent biography of Armand Hammer while he was still living. It took me years to determine what he had omitted from a memoir published early in his life, a paid-for biography published in late middle age, and an autobiography published as an octogenarian. The omissions were far more dishonest than the published lies.

Trying to determine the truth of a book other than an autobiography can be even more difficult. If an author takes five years to investigate a topic, imagine how time-consuming it is for a reviewer to go through the evidence as presented. Last year I reviewed two different investigative books at two different times. The author of each was a journalist known to and respected by me. Each of those two reviews brought detailed rebuttals from individuals mentioned unfavorably, rebuttals aimed at demonstrating inaccuracies by the authors, rebuttals meant to scold reviewers like myself who accepted the evidence presented by the authors at face value. I felt an obligation to examine the charges. In both cases, I found factual errors. The errors did not render either book worthless overall. But I shudder to think how much of the inaccurate information will find its way into the source notes of research papers and later books on the same subjects.

**T**he best solution to the accuracy problem is multi-pronged: authors who are careful, proud researchers; editors who demand evidence and then evaluate it thoughtfully; publishing

house lawyers who demand sentence-by-sentence documentation; readers who pay at least as much attention to brand names in publishing as they do to brand names of toothpaste, and then reward the houses that sell accurate books, shunning those that don't.

Until the situation improves, fuller disclosure is a partial answer. Robert A. Caro and his publisher Knopf found one effective method. After his heavily documented multi-volume biography of Lyndon Johnson came under attack, Caro responded in the paperback edition of volume two by adding 14 pages of sourcing.

I also admire the honesty of author Jonathan Kwitny, who died recently. In his biography of Pope John Paul II, *Man of the Century*, published by Henry Holt, Kwitny told readers, "I hope anyone who finds an error will very calmly inform me of it so I can seek its correction in any later editions." In the bibliography of that same book, Kwitny cites hundreds of previous books and articles. But instead of taking them at face value, he told readers that when the material from those sources was "especially significant or in dispute, my practice is to try to talk with the author involved, to go over what he or she has written, assess the evidence and sometimes try to talk with original sources. Interviews with an author can determine what I write as much as what appears on [that author's] printed page."

At last, an author telling readers: Buyer beware. ■

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# Right Side Up

By Anthony Arrove

Some years ago, Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano argued that the effectiveness of writers on the left “depends on our capacity to be audacious and astute, clear and appealing.” He added, “I would hope that we can create a language more fearless and beautiful than that used by conformist writers to greet the twilight.”

## Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World

By Eduardo Galeano  
Metropolitan Books  
358 pages, \$24

## Days and Nights of Love and War

By Eduardo Galeano  
Monthly Review Press  
178 pages, \$16

If one wants an illustration of the truth of this claim, and an example of its achievement, you need only read Galeano's two most recent books, the new and brilliant *Upside Down* and the lyrical and moving *Days and Nights of Love and War*, just reissued in an updated edition by Monthly Review Press.

In *Upside Down*, the subject under scrutiny is the world capitalist order (or as he jokes, “the system that used to be called capitalism”). In Galeano's carefully reasoned argument, the accused stands condemned of destroying our memory, our humanity, and the possibility that we have much more of a collective future. Time is running short, and Galeano is not tinkering around the edges of the system.

“Never have so many economic resources and so much scientific and technological knowledge been brought to bear on the production of death,” he charges. “The countries that sell the world the most weapons are the same ones in charge of world peace. Fortunately for them, the threat of world peace is receding. The war market is on the rebound and the outlook for profits from butchery is promising. The weapons factories are as busy as those producing enemies to fit their needs.”

Designed as a counter-textbook, with boxed sidebars, playful asides, summary

paragraphs, aphorisms, prose poems, lesson plans (“Racism and Sexism 101”) and points for discussion, Galeano digs into the contradictions of a world order that “enjoins everyone to consume” while it “prevents the vast majority of humanity from doing so.”

Though dense with facts and historical details, the writing in *Upside Down* is so compelling that even familiar statistics that risk becoming abstractions—1.6 billion people are worse off now than they were 15 years ago; one Mexican billionaire is as rich as 17 million Mexicans; of every 10 poor people, seven are women—ring with proper indignation.

With Brechtian simplicity, Galeano (translated by Mark Fried) jars the reader, both visually and intellectually, though at times the placement of sidebars interrupts the flow of the text and makes one wish they had found a way of waiting for a paragraph break, or at least the end of the sentence, before your eye is pulled to the promise of a new narrative. Following Brecht's observation that famines don't just happen under capitalism, but are organized, he notes that poverty, torture and fear are consequences of the deliberate plans of those running the upside-down world: “The system of power that creates poverty is the same one that wages war without quarter on the desperate people it begets. ... Jails and bullets are the proper therapy for the poor.” If one senses a dark and bitter sense of humor here, as well as fury and condemnation, it's because Galeano insists on humanizing and personalizing his analysis.

*Days and Nights of Love and War*, a book first published in Cuba in 1978, is a series of vignettes, episodes of Galeano's travels and experiences that seem as if they were written on scraps of paper as notes for an autobiography. Galeano has lived what he describes as a



“Gypsy life,” including long periods of exile from Uruguay, where he was born in 1940 and to which he returned in 1984, and Argentina, where he worked for many years as a journalist. Galeano's work led to repeated clashes with authorities during a time when many of his friends and colleagues in Latin America were “disappeared,” tortured and murdered by military and paramilitary forces trained, supplied and encouraged by the U.S. State Department and Pentagon.

Two recurring themes in Galeano's writing are a longing for a sense of place (“I'm nostalgic for a country which does not yet exist on a map”) and the importance of memory. “The right to remember does not figure among the human rights consecrated by the United Nations,” he points out in *Upside Down*. “But now more than ever we must insist upon it and act on it.”

Despite the horrors he documents, and the tragedies he personally experienced, Galeano does not relent. His passion for this world—and for changing it—seems to have grown even stronger with age. “We are what we do,” he writes in the essay “In Defense of the Word” included in *Days and Nights of Love and War*, “especially what we do to change what we are: our identity resides in action and in struggle.”

Indeed, Galeano has not abandoned the dream of fundamentally righting the upside-down world, though many of his colleagues have walked down that path. “Human history is like soccer,” he jibes, a sport whose “finest trait” is the “capacity for surprise.” (Galeano knows

ILLUSTRATIONS: JOSÉ GUADALUPE POSADA, FROM *UPSIDE DOWN*



more than a passing thing about the world's favorite sport, and recently wrote *Soccer in Sun and Shadow* about its history and politics.)

In response to those who thought that the possibility of an alternative collapsed with the fall of "actually existing socialism" from 1989 to 1991, Galeano counters that "we were all invited to the funeral of socialism, but the undertakers were mistaken about who had died." Stalinism was a mirror of capitalism in the West, and both systems used the other's crimes to justify its own. "Perhaps that explains the ease with which it fell, without pity or glory, and the rapidity with which a new power emerged featuring the same personalities" running the show. "Bureaucrats turned a quick somersault and in a flash reappeared as successful businessmen and mafia capos. Moscow now has twice as many casinos as Las Vegas, while wages have fallen in half."

Galeano does not discuss the details, but in contrast to the promises of what the "free market" would deliver to Eastern Europe that were broadcast internationally at the end of the Cold War, life expectancy declined from 1987 to 1997 in Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, Russia and Ukraine. According to new World Bank figures, in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union "the number of people who are living under the poverty line of \$4 a day has grown, from 14 million in 1989 to 147 million today." The *New York Times* reports that in Dzerzhinsk, 250 miles east of Moscow, "life expectancy is just 42 years for men, 47 for women. Serfs breaking rocks in the Czar's Russia lived longer than that."

But people do not simply roll over in the face of such degradation and indignation. As we have seen the world over, they tend to resist. In Galeano's words, "It mostly happens at the local level, where across the world a thousand and one new forces are emerging. They emerge from the bottom up and the inside out. Without making a fuss, they shoulder the task of reconceiving democracy."

Like many books on the left, *Upside Down* and *Days and Nights of Love and War* have little to say about strategy. In place of a program, Galeano offers vision: "People shall work for a living instead of living for work"; "The world

shall wage war not on the poor but rather on poverty"; "Food shall not be a commodity"; "Street children shall not be treated like garbage, because there shall be no street children."

It's an excellent vision, and even if it will take a fuller discussion of strategy

and tactics, as well as politics and priorities, to change the upside-down world, Eduardo Galeano has given us more than enough reason to set it right. ■

Anthony Arrove is an editor at *South End Press* and *International Socialist Review*.

## Agonies and Ecstasies

By Joshua Rothkopf

**T**raffic is a diamond-hard film about compromises; they gather like flies swarming around something rotten—in this case, the booming economy of the cocaine trade. But for the most part we stick with the

### Traffic

Written by Stephen Gaghan  
Directed by Steven Soderbergh

### O Brother, Where Art Thou?

Written by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen  
Directed by Joel Coen

flies, and that's what sets Steven Soderbergh's epic apart from those beautiful junkie tragedies like last year's *Requiem for a Dream*, which plunged us harrowingly down the standard doomed trajectory of bad to worse. Here, the demand for drugs is a grim premise, impervious to countervailing forces of law and crime; new addictions bloom in

the harsh crackdown, leaving the queasy feeling of stalemate.

Cynicism makes for a cold bill of fare, but Stephen Gaghan's quietly conceptual script (based on an '80s British TV miniseries) pushes through the material to its internal terrain, modulating a dozen or so characters—users, dealers, lawmen and footsoldiers—from their initial earnestness to futility and a wising-up that registers as survival. He makes many of the same points over—fewer than you might expect in two and a half hours—but Soderbergh splinters the repetition into a masterful disconnect that's wholly appropriate: Only federal czars and their militarized campaigns would dare suggest the war on drugs has a clear target, much less an "exit strategy."

It has taken Soderbergh less than a year to re-emerge as Hollywood's leading liberal, first with *Erin Brockovich* and now *Traffic*. The studios must be very proud of



The drug war goes up against the wall in *Traffic*.

BOB MARSHAK/USA FILMS

these films: the director as designated political conscience. (Soderbergh also likes using stars and works leanly.) But his craft makes for greater rewards: *Traffic* controls its sprawl better than *Magnolia* and it's funnier than *The Insider*. Moreover, Soderbergh has an innate feel for confessional monologue and doubt—a generosity to his players extending back to his debut, *sex, lies and videotape*.

One notices this right away in *Traffic* as it introduces Michael Douglas as a pot-busting Ohio judge called to Washington to be the new drug czar. As he is debriefed, first by the chief of staff (a brusk Albert Finney, scheduling him for some “face time” with the president), then by an intense aide and finally by his exhausted predecessor, a general who suspects an ulterior power-grab, Douglas seems almost overwhelmed by the flood of no-nonsense advice. Soderbergh, better than most, plays off the built-in drama in this veteran actor's face—its potential for weakness barely concealed by uprightness. He's building his film from reactions, a strategy that collects more unstable faces: a cagey Tijuana policeman with lazy, Mitchum-esque eyes (Benicio Del Toro); a pregnant and contentedly oblivious mom (Catherine Zeta-Jones) who returns home from lunch at the country club to find her drug-importer husband being carted off to jail; a ripe-cheeked teen-ager (Erika Christensen) reclining into teary bliss as she freebases with her prep-school friends. (One of the film's first ironies has her meeting her father at the airport: It's the new drug czar bragging about his presidential face time.)

Soderbergh so dedicates his camera to these private battles behind furrowed brows that he actually ends up freeing himself from bang-bang plot mechanics and hot confrontations, arriving at an even sharper realism. (Del Toro burns such an impression, you forget he's speaking almost exclusively in Spanish.) A color-coded tonal palette is bold enough to border on the crude: dusty yellows and browns for the scenes in Mexico, ice-blues for the party-liners in Washington and Ohio, blown-out pastels for Zeta-Jones' La Jolla comfort zone slipping into its hazy nightmare. But Soderbergh, who serves as his own cinematographer under a false name, knows what he's doing, saving time he would otherwise spend on

setting up bearings for an across-the-board deepening of solitary anxieties.

These grappings add up to something fluidly narrative; *Traffic* is no more exhilarating than in its rhythms, its rhymes. When Douglas hails a drink at a stifling Georgetown soirée (complete with real-life senators keen for some of that wicked movie highlife), it's punctuated by his escapist's lunge to the bar that's close to a desperate plea. Increasingly frayed by his daughter's lapse, Douglas is “tired of talking to experts who have never left the Beltway” and touches down like a space alien in Mexico City for a promising appointment with a high-ranking *federalé*. But a reverse shot during their meeting reveals Del Toro sitting in at the periphery; his part has finally caught up to those defeated eyes and we already know that his superior is crooked. Addicts heal themselves, the *federalé* offers glibly, and suddenly we're with the daughter, bored at her rehab camp and destined to run.

## New addictions bloom, impervious to countervailing forces of the war on drugs.

Only occasionally do the transitions feel groundless: Zeta-Jones takes to her imprisoned husband's line of work with a savvy that's too abrupt, ferociously ordering hits on a witness and securing exclusive distribution in his absence. Maybe if she played it more knowingly—or rapidly materialistic—her shift from carpooler to druglord would strike the necessary satiric notes. Instead the half-smart character seems to have truly been in the dark for all those years. (And if you're married to a handsome slime like Steven Bauer, how could you not know?)

There's plenty of pungent sauce to spread around though, especially Luis Guzman and Don Cheadle reprising their hilarious by-play from *Boogie Nights*, now as cops who dream of busting the big (white) boys, Miguel Ferrer as their tough-talking captive, and Dennis Quaid as a weaselly lawyer who looks both ways before sitting down with his client. Special mention also should be made of the young actor Topher Grace who, as another prep-school druggie, mouths off a tumbling

corker of arrogant barrage at Douglas.

By the time we get back to Washington, we've seen so much horrifying evidence—student IDs pressed against a crack hotel's check-in window, the scared lope of an informant running for his life, a liquefying toy made of high-impacted cocaine—as to make Finney's hair-parted hardliner register as woefully impotent. *Traffic* is receiving a great many kudos for being comprehensive (which it is), but it's far from objectively balanced, as if this sympathetic canvas needed an unrepentant hawk to make it complete. You get the message loud and clear in an elegant series of dissolves: a never-ending circle of recovering addicts, so many like us.

The smarty-pants Coen brothers have their answers too—or so their defenders have always claimed—but with *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* they might have finally relaxed into some. It's about a trio of escapees from a Mississippi chain gang, each supplied with his own bug-eyed signature: angry Pete of the jutting lower jaw (John Turturro), gentle Delmar of the gap-mouthed squint (Tim Blake Nelson) and smoothie Everett of the pomaded pomp (George Clooney). Their comic misadventures are credited to *The Odyssey*, but I can't imagine anyone but tweedy college professors mistaking this for heft; the Coens certainly don't, though for good measure we get a Bible-selling Cyclops (John Goodman), some alluring sirens and a more pragmatic Penelope (Holly Hunter) than Homer ever intended—she's found herself a new man and he's “bona fide.”

No, this isn't about fidelity to sources, except to the Depression-era old-timey songs that sweetly fill in the gaps. Early on, the convicts wander into a radio station and cut a track for cash—it's an electrifying single take of the hobo anthem “I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow” (the lead voice belongs to Dan Tyminski)—and the film's wandering spirit crystallizes. Melody is just what the gab-happy Coens have long needed more of; another sequence of car-stealing and campfire high jinks comes pretty close to poetry as set to the Kossoy Sisters' angelic “I'll Fly Away.” When these “Soggy Bottom Boys” (as they come to be beloved as) eventually make it to the stage and thrill the crowd—well, you can decide if *O Brother* needs to mean anything more than that. ■



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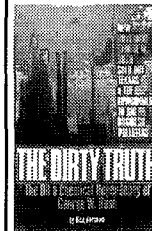


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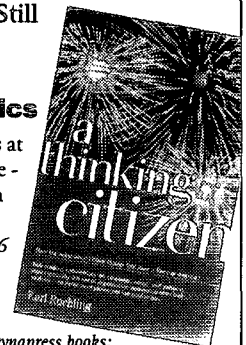
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## SYLVIA

By Nicole Hollander







"What did she ask them?"

I approximate: "If your vagina could wear something, what would it wear?"

"You mean underwear?"

"Neyn," I say. It made so much sense inside the theater, Ensler with her perfect shiny bob of hair, listing the answers women gave her—taffeta dress, mink—though even then it was hard to imagine, because how can you dress a part of you that is a passageway? In that semi-darkness, it was easier to make the metaphorical leap. I wanted to say, "It's like asking, 'If you were a tree, what kind would you be?'" but the conditional is so difficult. The conversation veers away and back, during which the teacher tells us the word for "period"

(*pekl*), and another student says that we've already learned it. But the rest of us are so forgetful that we deny

## If the 'Story' Could Talk ...

By S.L. Wisenberg

"Shulamis," the teacher says, as I sknew she would, "vos hert zikh?"

Shulamis is my Yiddish name and the Yiddish teacher is asking what's being heard, meaning, "What's doing?" The class nearly always begins this way, round-robin, like group therapy, like consciousness-raising. It's all female, it so happens, though men have come and gone, mostly gone. Over the years of weeks, we've learned of *tsuris*—trouble—with contractors, computer repairmen, auto mechanics and adult children; births, deaths and illness; weddings and bar mitzvahs attended; cruises and other travels; and often, of current movies and plays. Since I saw a performance Saturday night, I say just that, except that I say *forshung* instead of *forshstellung*, which means I attended a research, rather than a play. Once that's cleared up, the teacher asks, "And what was it called?"

I improvise: "*Di Vagina Monologn*."

I'm in luck: double cognates. But because our teacher doesn't want us to rely on cognates, she teaches us another word: *dos muterort*, mother place. Of course we have to ask why a vagina is neuter (*dos*) and the teacher reminds us that "beard" in Yiddish is feminine: *di bord*. She also tells us the Sanskrit word for vagina, *yoni*. I continue with my recital. I tell them that the writer was the performer, that she wore a *zhupke* (skirt, but I meant *kleyd*, a dress) and no shoes. For a moment, my fellow Yiddishists imagine that Eve Ensler performed topless.

The questions come at me thick and fast, in Yiddish and English:

"About vaginas?"

"What is there to say?"

"You can't talk about everything. That's private."

"*Dos muterort*," I say, "*iz shtum*," using the only word I can think of for "silent." I'm thinking of one form of the letter *alef*, which is *shtum* or "silent."

"And the breasts," a classmate asks, "they speak?"

"Yoh," I say.

"Could I write a monologue about my nose?"

"It wouldn't be very interesting."

"The writer," I say, "interviewed many women."

"About their vaginas?"

learning anything until we've heard it 10 times. It's tricky to keep up with this wanted-dead-or-alive language, which few of us actually use outside each 90-minute session.

The class meets in the chapel of an Orthodox synagogue in Chicago, though the class is sponsored by a nonsectarian Jewish adult-ed organization, not the synagogue. We used to meet in the library of a nearby worn-out building before it changed hands and became an Indian center. This chapel has a *mekhitsa*, the wall that separates men and women at prayer. We meet in the women's section, not because the group happens to be all-female, but because there's more space to move around. Here, where we have learned there is no Yiddish word for "brunch" but there is one for "e-mail" (*blitz-post*), we now learn the words *damen-bandazh* ("ladies-bandage," or sanitary napkin) and *klole* ("curse"), and discuss whether God's curse was menstruation or childbirth. After class, we walk down the synagogue hallway speaking (in English) about menstruation.

Later at home I look up "vagina" in my modern Yiddish-English dictionary (copyright 1968, reprinted 1990) and find *di vagina* (hard g) and *di mutersheyd*. (I trust my teacher, though; she gives us the most current translations.) I look for "tampon" (not there), "vulva" (missing), clitoris (gone), feeling uneasily like an 11-year-old, looking up dirty words in the dictionary.

Does this mean that the folks who claim that Yiddish is dead are right, that the *mameloshen*—"mother tongue"—is not a living language? "Orgasm" (cognate) is listed, because, I assume, men have them. Same with "masturbation" (*der onanizm*). "Penis" is a cognate, and its slang variations, *shmuck* and *putz*, are unlisted but quite at home in America.

For a moment the bilingual dictionary makes me feel partially disappeared, my genitalia only half recognized. Later my teacher will tell me, via *blitz-post*, that there are about 40 entries for "vagina" in her Yiddish thesaurus, and that her all-time favorite is *di mayse*, "the story."

But before I know this, while I am still contemplating my too-empty dictionary, I think: For a few minutes, there we were—Orthodox and Conservative and secular Jewish women, hair covered and wildly uncovered—talking aloud and bilingually about vaginas as we sat by ourselves behind the *mekhitsa*. ■

S.L. Wisenberg's short story collection, *The Sweetheart Is In*, is forthcoming in April from TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press.